

## THE SEASON OF PASSAGE

CHRISTOPHER PIKE

### PROLOGUE

It was a nightmare. But Lauren Wagner did not know that. It's often that way with bad dreams.

[T-minus five minutes and counting.]

'We are not evil,' a voice said, deep inside Lauren's mind. 'We just enjoy our duty.'

Lauren felt anxious. The countdown was ending. At last she was leaving for Mars. Soon the shuttle's rockets would ignite and she would be hurtled into space. All lights on the shuttle's control board shone green. Yet something was wrong. The lights were blurred, as if she were seeing them underwater. She tilted her head and found the rest of the cockpit also cloudy. She tried opening and closing her eyes to clear her vision, but it did

not help. In fact, her sight grew worse. The cloudiness puzzled her, as did her thoughts of duty, and evil.

[T-minus four minutes, thirty seconds, and counting.]

The computer's voice droned on. Lauren tried to move, but found her limbs strangely heavy, as if a massive hand pressed down on her body. Of course, she had experienced such a sensation before, while undergoing high-gravity training in the centrifuge. Yet now the pressure made no sense. They were still on the ground, still on Earth. For a moment Lauren thought the problem might be associated with her safety straps. However, when she checked the

belts, she found that they were not tight. Her puzzlement deepened. It did not seem right, that a hold so weak should feel so strong.

[T-minus four minutes and counting.]

Lauren looked to her left, in the direction of the shuttle's pilot, Gary Wheeler. Crouched over a dark blue screen, he wore a white flight suit similar to her own. Because of his helmet, she could not see his face, not unless he had the occasion to look directly at her. Lauren knew it was Gary, though. Only an hour earlier they had boarded the ship together. It had been at... When had it been? That was odd - suddenly she couldn't remember exactly when they had entered the shuttle. She couldn't even remember if it had been in the morning, or in the dead of night.

[T-minus three minutes, thirty seconds, and counting.]

'Gary,' Lauren called, squirming in her seat. Suddenly, for no reason, her lower abdomen began to cramp, making her feel nauseated. 'Gary,' she repeated, 'I'm having trouble with my eyes. Gary?'

He didn't answer. He continued to stare at his dark blue computer screen, sitting as still as a statue.

'Gary, what's wrong?' Lauren asked.

'His soul has been bled,' a voice said inside her mind, the same voice that had spoken of duty and evil.

Lauren shook her head, trying to free her mind of the disturbing thoughts. But they weren't really thoughts, not her own at least. She recognized that peculiar fact even though she was having trouble recognizing much else. The shuttle was all wrong. Four windows that should have been looking up into clear blue skies were missing. Flickering rows of sober-colored lights had taken their place, purple lights that reminded her of spoiled flesh, red ones that could have been smeared with blood. Plus the shuttle's multiple computer screens were crawling with faint silver

lines that turned with spiked edges into a dizzy infinity. Realization hit Lauren hard.

This was not the shuttle!

She was in the Hawk, the Martian lander!

[T-minus three minutes and counting.]

'Gary!' Lauren screamed. She tried throwing herself against the straps, in an effort to break free and reach Gary. Maybe he could tell her what the hell was going on. Unfortunately, the cramps in her abdomen tightened further, into knots of cold pain, and she could barely move.

Her struggle was lost on Gary. He continued to sit silently, the faceplate of his helmet turned slightly away from her, an empty shadow.

[T-minus two minutes and counting.]

'Gary, are we on Mars?' Lauren cried. 'Why are we in the Hawk?'

'A little pinch and then, sweet,' the voice said inside her mind.

Lauren's anxiety now bordered on terror. Twisting to the right, she groped for a button that would unshield a window and let her see outside. The tip of her finger just reached it, and as the window's metal cover slid aside, she gasped in shock. Outside was a sea of molten lava, a turbulent landscape of incandescent mud and erupting geysers. Even as she watched, a shower of sparks splattered the window, leaving behind a filth of dark glowing embers. There was no mistaking what was happening.

They were sinking slowly into the sea of lava.

'Gary!' Lauren screamed again. She was having trouble breathing. The air was suddenly filled with sulfur fumes. They seemed to sweep up from beneath her seat and loop around her head like an invisible garrote, choking her.

[T-minus one minute and counting.]

Summoning the last of her failing strength, Lauren threw

herself again against the straps. This time she was able to move several inches. She reached over to touch Gary's leg. But instead of feeling the smooth surface of his flight suit, her fingers encountered a scaly hide, oozing with sticky mucus.

[T-minus thirty seconds and counting.]

'No,' Lauren moaned, snapping back her head in revulsion and pressing herself as deep as possible into her seat. It was then, finally, that Gary slowly began to turn toward her.

At last Lauren's vision cleared.

Grinning at her from inside his helmet was a skull. Not an old skull, something that had lain abandoned in a sandy desert for a century or two, but a fresh skull, white and moist, a fresh victim of unspeakable crimes. It was as if Gary's head had just been picked clean by a swarm of maggots.

'Kiss me, baby,' the voice inside her head said. 'Lick me.'

The hollow sockets were black as deep space, lightless holes that had never looked upon a bright sun, not even in life. Yet within them Lauren sensed a cruel intelligence. The naked jawbone moved. Again the voice spoke inside her mind, and now there was no question about its origin. The skull was talking to her.

'Do you wish to be immortal?' it asked. 'Certainly you don't want to die. I understand that. It's what makes us so alike.'

A bony hand reached out. The flesh had been chewed away from the fingers as well, although they dripped mucus. They grabbed her leg and clawed up her inner thigh. The cold knots inside her abdomen hardened into lumps of ice and the skull chuckled

obscenely. It was then that Lauren finally recognized its purpose, and rape was the smallest part of it. Together they would return from the

fourth planet, from a world no human being could have imagined. Together they would be made immortal, but in a way no god or angel had ever meant. It was all part of the plan, she realized, part of the curse. She began to weep.

The thing stood up. The skull stared down at her with gloating pleasure. A second sharp hand, a claw, reached out and pinched the inside of her leg, tearing her flesh, bringing the flow of blood inside her suit. She couldn't move, not an inch. She was numb to the bone, yet she felt everything in the sharpest way. Her blood was as cold as the ice in her guts.

[T-minus five seconds and counting. Four. Three. Two. One.]

The shuttle's rockets fired, and as they did, the thing bent over her, and its shadow covered her in a thick blanket of despair. Yet not so thick that Lauren did not cry out one last time for someone to save her. She cried...

## BOOK ONE The Garden

### ONE

'Don't touch me!' Lauren Wagner screamed. Still caught in the web of her nightmare, she shoved at the small hand that held her arm. Jennifer, her younger sister, fell to the ground atop a scattering of pine needles. But Jennifer quickly sprang to her feet and reached out once more.

'Jenny,' Lauren said, disgusted when she saw what she had done. Her T-shirt was drenched with sweat and her heart was pounding. She gave Jennifer a quick hug. 'Are you OK? I didn't mean to push you. I was having a nightmare.'

'I'm fine,' Jennifer said, more serious than startled.

'I'm sorry.' Lauren busied her hands over her sister's clothes. She realized she was trembling, and had to make a conscious effort to stop. Jennifer watched her closely, her clear blue eyes alert.

'You called someone, Lauren,' she said. 'Whose name did you call?'

Lauren hugged her thirteen-year-old sister again, tighter this time, and buried her face in Jennifer's brilliant hair. The chair she had dozed off in rocked forward on the forest floor. 'Was I talking in my sleep?' she asked. 'I had the strangest dream.'

Jennifer undid Lauren's hands and took a step back. Behind her, the orange light of the evening sun shone on

the tops of the surrounding pine trees. Wash Lake, a hundred yards off to their left, was a deep blue, calm and clear in the quiet of the forest. The fragrance of wild dandelions and blooming sunflowers was in the air. Yet in that moment it seemed to Lauren that Jennifer was not standing in the beautiful mountains of Wyoming, but in another place, a place where there was little beauty, and no sweet smells. Jennifer's gaze was far away and troubled.

'Whose name did you call?' Jennifer repeated.

Lauren forced a laugh and squeezed Jennifer's shoulders. 'You just startled me, is all. That's why I jumped. My dream - why, I can't even remember it. It was nothing. It was only a nightmare.'

Jennifer looked doubtful. She gestured to a stump near Terry's cabin. 'I was reading a book. Then you called me.'

Lauren wanted to change the subject. 'What book are you reading?' She started to run her fingers through Jennifer's long blond hair, but Jennifer shook her head and stepped away.

'Just a story,' she said. 'It's nothing.' Turning, she walked over to the stump and picked up her book. She sat down and began to read, without looking back up.

Lauren frowned. Jennifer was a paradox, she thought, full of joy one moment, troubled and serious the next. Sometimes she wondered if Jennifer spent too much time with her nose in books. It was not unusual for Jennifer to go through five novels a week, all kinds of novels: science fiction, fantasy, adventure books, and westerns. Lauren never censored them. She didn't understand why Jennifer hadn't answered her question.

But that reminded Lauren. She still had to read Terry's article. Terry Hayes was her fiancé, a newspaper reporter for the Houston Herald. Lauren picked up the paper from where it had fallen when she jumped up out of her

nightmare. The front page was dominated by a color picture that Terry had taken of the crew members of America's first expedition to Mars. Lauren was in the middle, down in front.

It was odd - she had been looking at the picture when she had fallen asleep. She knew her nightmare had had something to do with Mars. She called over to Jennifer. 'Terry wanted me to critique the second part of his article, but I've only got the first part. Didn't you tell me that boyfriend of yours could get me a copy of the Herald.'

Jennifer glanced up and blushed. 'He's not my boyfriend.'



'Then why were you holding his hand?'

'I didn't hold his hand. I didn't.'

'I understand. He was holding your hand.'

Jennifer had forgotten her book. 'Were you spying on us?'

'I wouldn't dream of it.'

'Right.' Jennifer said sarcastically.

Lauren was thoughtful. 'But I do seem to remember seeing him kiss you. Accidentally seeing you, that is. It was on the cheek.'

'He never!' Jennifer said indignantly.

'On the cheek but not far from your lips. A very long kiss, if my memory serves me correctly.'

Jennifer seemed about to make another sharp retort when she burst out laughing. 'You're just jealous because he thinks I'm prettier than you.'

Lauren blinked, surprised. 'He said that?'

Jennifer nodded, smug. Of course, Lauren had to agree with the young man. Jennifer was an exceptional beauty, one of those children who could turn a dozen heads in a crowded mall. Her features showed an interesting play of contradictory genes. They were clearly defined, yet also

delicate, waiflike. She spent many hours outdoors, and as a result always had a decent tan, which went well with her blue eyes. The latter possessed a cerulean clarity that was seldom found except in newborn babies. But it was her hair that was her crowning glory: long and curly, naturally blond to the point of looking bleached. On sunny days it swirled around her sleek shoulders like a protective aura. To look at Jennifer was to see something beautiful; it was as simple as that.

'You told me his name,' Lauren said. 'What is it? Dave?'

'Daniel.'

'I see, Daniel. Not Dan or Danny, but Daniel.'

'I thought calling him by his proper name would make him feel more important,' Jennifer explained.

'Did you read that in a book?'

Jennifer shook her head.

'Are you sure?' Lauren asked.

'No. Yes! I like that name, Daniel.'

Lauren eyed her sister's discarded book. 'What are you reading, anyway?'

Jennifer bowed her head and touched the book's dull red cover. 'Just something I found at the library.'

'And it's a secret?'

Jennifer hesitated. 'It's a love story.'

Lauren laughed. 'I bet Danny - Daniel told you to read it. I'm going to make sure Terry watches you closely the next two years.' Instantly, Lauren regretted mentioning her leaving, although it was something they had talked about enough. She knew Jennifer preferred not to discuss the expedition to Mars while they were in Wyoming. It was strange - her sister had no trouble with the subject when they were in Houston. Lauren added, 'Will Daniel be here soon?'

Jennifer brightened. 'He said yesterday that he'd be here

at six. He's going to show me one of his weapons.'

'Sounds like a date to me.' Lauren checked the position of the sun. 'He should be here any minute. Do you want me to take a walk?'

'You don't have to,' Jennifer said, although she quickly stood, like maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. Lauren took the hint and got up, tucking Terry's newspaper in her white shorts. The air was warm and dry, and the feel of the sun on her bare legs was delicious.

'I need the exercise,' Lauren said. 'What did you mean, he's going to show you one of his weapons? Is he in the service?'

Jennifer giggled. 'No. He's only fourteen. He collects weapons. He's part Indian.'

Lauren nodded. 'That explains it. Is he going to show you how to shoot a bow and arrow?'

'No. He's bringing an elephant rifle.'

'Great. My little sister's chasing an Indian who hunts elephants in a pine forest.' Jennifer thought that was funny. Lauren continued, 'I bought some Cokes in town yesterday, if you want to give your friend a drink. And Jenny, if Terry comes, have Daniel give a blast on his gun.'

'What if he doesn't bring any bullets?'

Lauren was already among the trees, the pine needles crackling under her bare feet. 'Then have him send up smoke signals,' she called.

Soon Lauren reached the shore of the lake, where she turned west, heading in the direction of the sun. It was not long before she entered the shallows and broke into a jog, and then began to run. She loved to race along the shore and feel the sand between her toes and the water splashing up her back. She ran for five hard minutes, and covered at least a mile - for she was in excellent shape, and had always been fast on her feet. She only stopped when she came to

a wide stream, which from experience she knew to have the slipperiest rocks in all of Wyoming. She had a tiny dent on the back of her skull courtesy of the stream.

She was hot, and the lake was tempting. Unfortunately, she didn't have her suit, and her shorts and T-shirt felt like lead weights when they were wet. Plus she was something of a celebrity these days, what with the launch date only a couple of weeks away. It wouldn't do to have one of NASA's leading public relations specimens to be photographed nude.

Then again, it might do wonders for their budget.

Lauren listened closely for a minute, scanning the beach in both directions and finding no one. What decided her in the end was the thought of not seeing any green or open water for two whole years. She had to embrace nature while she could, and if someone did snap her picture, at least she would look like she was having fun. She had her shorts and shirt off in five seconds, and was in water over her head in another ten. It was not merely cold, it was liquid ice, and she loved it. Wash Lake was a half mile across, and she swam strongly toward the center. Had it not been for her bare bottom, she would have tried to swim to the far shore.

But her run must have taken more out of her than she realized. Close to the middle of the lake, she found herself working hard and decided to roll over on her back and take it easy. She drifted along for some time, paddling just enough to stay afloat. Out of the corners of her eyes, the trees looked ten times more distant than they really were, as they always did from surface level. The sky began to darken as the sun slipped behind a forested ridge, and the water temperature finally made itself felt on her muscles. After all the money NASA had invested in her training, it would be a bummer if she drowned. Yet it was with regret that she rolled on to her belly and began to swim toward the shore. She knew even then that she would remember this swim while she was walking across the sands of Mars.

Out of the water, Lauren plopped down on a boulder beside the stream and slipped back into her clothes. The evening air held the day's warmth - she didn't mind the damp material clinging to her skin. She had left the paper in the sand. She picked it up and flipped to Terry's article.

WAR OF THE WORLDS

by Terry Hayes, Reporter

Houston. On October 28, 2002, almost two years ago, two Russian spacecraft touched down on Mars, in the mountainous region known as Tharsis. The expedition was headed by Dmitri Maximov. For ten days his men explored the area, beaming to Earth incredible footage of the alien landscape. But then, on November 6, all contact with them was lost. Two days later, communication was also lost with Carl Bensk, the sole cosmonaut aboard the mother ship, in orbit around Mars. Since that time, neither the men on the planet, nor Carl Bensk, have been heard from. They are presumed dead.

What happened to them? Five major theories have been put forth to explain their disappearance: 1) mechanical failure; 2) natural calamity; 3) alien infection; 4) alien monsters; and 5) insanity.

Of these five theories, the first is thought most likely, but only in the improbable context of the others. The chance of both communication systems on board the landers failing simultaneously is astronomically small. Furthermore, the two craft landed almost a mile apart. If one had exploded during takeoff, the

other would have been spared. For the mechanical theory to hold water, the mother ship would also have had to suffer a major system failure. The theory breaks down under even the most casual scrutiny.

A natural calamity? Mars is now known to have sand-storms, and earthquakes are much more common there than on Earth. It snowed often while the Russians were in communication. The Tharsis region is also volcanic, or at least it has been in the past. However, satellites circling Mars reported no unusual weather during the period in question, and no obvious eruptions. In either case, the orbiting ship should have been unaffected, and Carl Bensk should still have returned home.

Life has never been proven to exist on Mars. Nevertheless, a variety of microscopic organisms could be flourishing in the planet's atmosphere and soil undetected. Our investigation of Mars is still in its infant stages. As is well known, a human being exposed to a virus or a bacteria from an alien environment would have no natural

defense. Skeptics of this theory, however, point out that such an infection would have had to strike at lightning speed to prevent the cosmonauts from radioing Earth. Given the harsh Martian environment, advanced forms of life are considered impossible. Plus, of course, none of the Russians saw anything that looked alive. But even if such creatures did exist, they would once again have had to kill at an incredible speed to prevent at least a warning from being sent to Earth. Certainly, no alien's arm could have reached all the way into space and murdered Carl Bensk, not unless the alien was part of an advanced civilization that had mastered the art of invisibility.

It must be clear by now that the fundamental criticism of all these theories centers on Mr Bensk. That is, except for the fifth theory - insanity. The Russians...

Lauren dropped the paper with a start as a loud explosion echoed across the lake. Daniel must have brought bullets, she thought. Terry must have arrived. She jumped to her feet and raced down the sandy beach. She ran fast, as hard as she had on the run out, and was gasping for air by the time she caught sight of Jennifer and her friend.

But Terry hadn't arrived, after all. Daniel was simply target shooting, using the cans of Coke she had bought yesterday. A handsome boy, he was dark complexioned, and had a remarkably well developed physique for a fourteen-year-old. The rifle he had cocked to his shoulder looked as if it could blow the head off a dinosaur.

'I told him you would come if he shot the gun,' Jennifer said with a laugh. 'Lauren, this is Daniel. Daniel, this is my big sister, Lauren. She's going to Mars in a couple of weeks.'

So what else is new, Lauren thought.

Daniel offered his hand. 'I know that. I saw you on TV last week. That's great that you're going to Mars. I'd like to go there myself someday.'

Lauren shook his hand. 'Pleased to meet you, Daniel. You'll get to go. In another twenty years they'll probably have tourist flights to Mars.'

'But Lauren's going to be one of the first there,' Jennifer said.

'The Russians were the first ones,' Daniel said. He added, 'Of course, they didn't come back.'

'No, they didn't,' Lauren agreed.

'That was a lousy way for me to say hello,' Daniel said wisely. 'Sorry.'

'That's all right,' Lauren said.

'It's pretty cold there, isn't it?' Daniel asked.

'Our suits will keep us warm,' Lauren said. 'At least, that's what NASA tells us.'

'I tried on her helmet,' Jennifer broke in.

'What was it like?' Daniel asked, interested.

'It didn't fit. It was like wearing a bowl over your head. It was fun, though.'

'We'll see you on TV when you're there', won't we?' Daniel asked.



'Yes,' Lauren said. 'Except you'll see everything twenty minutes after it happens. Even traveling at the speed of light, our radio signals will take that long to reach Earth. You probably know all that stuff.'

'Yeah,' Daniel said. 'Pretty long ways to travel. Jenny says you'll be gone two years.'

Lauren nodded. Jennifer explained, 'The trip home takes the most time. They have to wait for the Earth to swing back around the sun. Hey, Daniel, did you hear about the computer that runs their ship? His name's Friend. I think that's a neat name.'

'I read about him in the papers,' Daniel said. 'Is it true he really knows how to think?'

Lauren smiled. 'He thinks just fine, as long as he doesn't have to make a decision. He only knows what he has been programmed to know, like a PC in your home. But since that's just about everything mankind has learned in the last five thousand years, he's pretty smart.'

'He talks, doesn't he?' Daniel asked.

'Like you and me,' Lauren said.

'I talked to him over the radio,' Jennifer said.

'What did he say?' Daniel asked.

'I asked if he enjoyed living in a spaceship, and he said, "Yes, Miss Wagner."'

'He called you Miss Wagner?' Daniel asked.

'He's very polite,' Jennifer said. 'But I didn't talk to him that much. I couldn't think of anything, you know, that I wanted to say to a machine.'

Daniel shook his head, impressed. 'All this stuff is so far out.' He inspected Lauren more closely. 'Lauren, how come your hair's all wet? Were you swimming in the lake?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I swam all the way out.'

'How come your shorts didn't get wet?' Daniel asked.

Lauren shrugged. He was a big boy. 'Because I took them off.'

Jennifer blushed. Daniel nodded. 'I used to go swimming naked all the time,' he said.

'You did?' Jennifer asked, amazed.

Daniel shrugged. 'Sure.' He addressed Lauren. 'I hope you didn't go swimming alone.'

'I was alone, yes.' He had his eyes on her, and Lauren wasn't sure what he was thinking. But he seemed a nice enough kid. 'Why not?'

Daniel spoke gravely. 'A girl my age drowned last week. She went out too far and cramped up. At least that's what my brother thinks happened to her. The water's pretty cold. I had to dig the hole for her.'

Lauren grimaced. 'You what?'

Jennifer looked uncomfortable. She said quickly, 'Daniel sometimes helps out at Olive Grove Cemetery. He usually just does gardening. You know the place, Lauren? You've seen it on the road in.'

'You helped bury her?' Lauren asked, not really wanting to know.

'Yeah,' Daniel said. 'The owner doesn't have much equipment. Sometimes I help him put the coffins in the

hole. You have to be careful. We had a lid pop open on us once. Hell - I'm being gross. I should shut up.'

'I'm a doctor,' Lauren said. 'I'm hard to gross out.'

Daniel stepped to his bike. A canvas bag stuffed with papers straddled the handlebars. 'I got a copy of that Houston paper for you,' he said, pulling it out of the bag and handing it to her.

"That's great,' Lauren said. She pointed to the row of three Coke cans sitting atop a boulder approximately two hundred yards away. The light had begun to fail, and even under perfect conditions, Daniel would have had to be an excellent shot to hit them. But Lauren wouldn't be surprised if he could. He had a cool confidence about him. She could see why Jennifer liked him. 'Were you target shooting?' she asked.

'I was just showing off,' he replied, swinging the stock of the rifle into the soft of his shoulder.

'Jenny tells me you collect weapons,' Lauren said.

Daniel eyed along the rifle's barrel. The rifle wasn't equipped with a telescopic sight. 'It's in my blood, being a savage Indian and all.'

'You're not savage,' Jennifer said.

Daniel winked at her, and Lauren caught a spark in his eyes which made her smile to herself. The guy liked Jennifer, which should have been no surprise, except Jennifer had few friends at school. Those she did have, she had known for many years. Jennifer was affectionate and warm, and most of the time happy, but unusually guarded for a thirteen-year-old.

'What do you have in your collection?' Lauren asked.

'A Civil War cannon,' Daniel said, dropping to one knee, 'a dozen Chinese knives, an old Spanish sword, and a boomerang. I'll have to show you how to use it some time, Jenny. But my real prize is a crossbow my brother found.

Yeah, he just found it, in the mountains in Switzerland. Shoots as straight as this rifle here.' Daniel paused. 'Plug your ears.'

Lauren and Jennifer did so. Daniel pulled the trigger. The bang was loud, even with their ears covered. A spark flashed on the boulder where the cans sat. Daniel had missed. He took a deep breath, held it, and then fired again. The can on the right exploded. The fizzling foam flowed over the stone. Jennifer cheered briefly, then quickly replaced her fingers to her ears. Daniel fired once more, demolishing the can in the middle.

'Incredible,' Lauren said, impressed. In the deepening twilight, she could hardly see the remaining can, and she had better than twenty-twenty vision.

Jennifer patted Daniel on the back. 'My warrior.'

Daniel was nonchalant. He offered Jennifer his rifle. 'Would you like to give it a shot?'

Jennifer backed up, startled. She shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

Daniel turned to Lauren. 'Want to put the last can out of its misery?'

'Yeah.' Lauren took the gun, feeling an odd pleasure in its weight. This was how wars got started, she knew, with a fascination with powerful toys. She crouched down and tried to steady her aim, using her knee for support. Then Jennifer touched her side. 'What is it?' she asked, not pleased at the interruption.

'Don't use that,' Jennifer said.

'Huh?' Lauren squinted. For a moment, she had lost sight of the can.

'Don't fire the gun,' Jennifer said.

Slightly annoyed, Lauren asked, 'Why not?'

I see you brought the fire.

'What did you say?' Lauren asked Daniel.

'I didn't say anything,' he said.

'I thought you said to fire ... see that I fire. Hmmm. Somebody said something.'

'I didn't say anything,' Daniel repeated.

Lauren turned her attention to Jennifer, who was standing perfectly still, watching her. 'What's your problem?' Lauren asked.

Jennifer was long in answering. 'You shouldn't use that.'

'Why not?' Lauren asked. 'Since when did you become a pacifist for the sake of Coke cans?'

Jennifer cocked her head to the side, as if she were listening with her whole body. Then suddenly she raised an eyebrow. 'Terry's almost here,' she said.

'Are you sure?' Lauren asked. She paused. 'I don't hear a thing.'

'Listen,' Jennifer said.

Lauren did so, and still didn't hear anything. Daniel had eyes like an eagle and Jennifer ears like a bat. Their kids would be superhuman. Daniel finally knelt and pressed his ear to the ground.

'A car is coming,' he said. 'Is it your boyfriend?'

Lauren quickly returned the rifle to Daniel. 'My fiancé,' she said absently. 'He's a reporter.' She looked at Jennifer, who was staring at the sky. For no reason, Lauren felt a sudden chill.

'I know him,' Daniel said. 'Terry Hayes. He and my brother are friends. Mr Hayes used to come here a lot on vacation years ago. I probably met him before you two did.'

Jennifer slowly shook herself, seemingly returning to Earth, and smiled faintly. 'We're like one big family,' she said. 'We all know each other.'

Lauren finally heard Terry's car for herself. 'Oh, Christ,' she said. 'My hair's a mess. I have to put my clothes on.' She jogged toward the cabin. At the porch steps she turned

and called. 'Hide that gun, Daniel. Terry hates the sight of guns.'

'Really?' he said. 'All right, sure.' Daniel dashed to the trees to stash the rifle.

'They remind him of wars,' Jennifer said thoughtfully.

'I wouldn't be surprised if they did,' Lauren muttered, skipping up the steps.

I see you brought the fire.

Why did I think that? Lauren asked herself. She didn't know. She didn't care. She hurried inside. God, she was going to Mars in a couple of weeks.

## TWO

Two miles from his cabin, Terry Hayes pulled his car onto the shoulder of the road and turned off the engine. The car was running fine, and he didn't need to take a piss. He had no reason to stop. In fact, he had plenty of reason to keep going. He had been looking forward to seeing Lauren since he had awoken that morning in Houston. But here he was, taking a break from his busy schedule to have an anxiety attack.

Instead of a drink.

Terry knew there was nothing more pathetic than a frustrated novelist who had become a reporter to pay the bills, unless the reporter just happened to be an alcoholic. He was that man all right, but he wasn't feeling too sorry for himself, just a little. First off, he hadn't had a drink in two years, so he really qualified as an ex-alcoholic, if you didn't listen to what the experts said about people like him always being in a perpetual state of recovery. Second, he might be unable to support himself with his books, but at least three had been published, one back in the days when he had had trouble untying his shoes at night, the other two after he met Lauren.

The first novel had been about four people who were actually only two people: an old couple who traveled back in time to when they were teenagers, to prevent themselves from meeting. The couple had not had a happy life together, and blamed each other. A paperback house in New York gave him a ten grand advance on the book after rejecting a half-dozen of his earlier attempts - and printed thirty-five thousand copies. The publisher brought it out without any fanfare, which automatically gave the book the shelf life of the average magazine. Terry saw the novel in the stores for a month, and stopped drinking for the entire time. But then it disappeared, and he never did see any royalties.



His second book went pretty much the same way as his first, even though it was better written. He had Lauren with him at the time of its publication, and when it came out, they went to every bookstore and supermarket and drugstore in Houston to gloat over it. Not that they found it everywhere they visited. It was a mystery novel, about a disturbed woman who committed suicide. But through an elaborate preset scheme, she managed to implicate all her friends in her supposed murder, in the end sending them to jail for a crime that had never happened.

At least the second book got reviewed in a few papers. They called him 'promising.' Lauren loved that word. She had the reviews framed, and made into Christmas cards, and printed up as wallpaper. It was supposed to be a joke, and Terry laughed, for he had just finished another book, and it was hot, even if the publisher who bought it only thought it was worth fifteen grand. It was about a cockroach named Ricky, who lived in a TV set. He was in love with the teenage girl in his house. Ricky was due out in six months, about the time Lauren was supposed to wake from her long trip out. Lauren was on his case to use the publicity surrounding her expedition to promote his story. He thought it would be the act of a shameless fellow, but he

was considering it. He didn't want the book dying like the previous two had.

Lauren loved the character Ricky. She said Terry and the cockroach were soulmates, and it was true. In the book, Ricky spent half his time trying to kick a white sugar habit that gave him hallucinations. Since kicking booze, Terry had turned into something of a sunflower-seed addict. The seeds didn't make him see anything, though. But if he ate a bag of seeds before he went to sleep at night, he had tons of dreams.

Usually they were about getting drunk.

He had met Lauren while on an assignment for his paper. He was supposed to interview the astronauts who were in training for the Mars mission. But he had not wanted the assignment. He knew nothing about science and had no desire to learn. His editor explained that their readers weren't interested in science, either. The paper wanted a human-interest story: what the astronauts did for recreation; what they thought about premarital sex and abortion; if any of them had ever been arrested for indecent exposure - that sort of thing. Terry told his editor he still didn't want the story. He felt it would be an unbearable compromise to his literary ethics. Plus there was a bar he was itching to visit

at lunch time, and his meeting with his editor was taking place at eleven-thirty. But then his editor showed him a picture of Lauren Wagner, and said she was one of the astronauts. Terry thought maybe science deserved a closer look.

At NASA's training center, he spoke to a receptionist who was expecting him. Unfortunately, she said, all the crew were busy in simulators, with the exception of the doctor, who was working out in the gym. He was disappointed. Never in his wildest imagination did it occur to him that NASA would entrust the health of the most expensive human undertaking in history to a woman doctor. Terry wasn't a sexist by any means. He simply believed that most men in power were. But he had told his editor he would come back with a story. He followed the receptionist's directions to the gym.

Of course, when he got there, he found the young woman in the photograph. Dr Lauren Wagner was running on a treadmill, with two wires attached to her chest under her blue T-shirt. Her shiny dark brown hair bounced as she ran, and it was not the only thing that bounced. He had heard bras were unnecessary in space, and he supposed if she was going to go there someday, she'd better get ready. He introduced himself as an important reporter and asked if he could interview her. She smiled pleasantly, and said, in a few minutes. He saw no reason why he should leave. He sat down and watched her run, for a good twenty minutes. Occasionally she apologized for not talking. She explained that it would interfere with her breathing, and give false measurements on her cardiovascular fitness. So she bounced along. Terry accepted it as all in a day's work. He had already decided he was going to marry her.

Eventually Lauren finished and asked him to wait a few minutes longer while she took a shower. He was feeling bold. He told her his tape recorder was waterproof. She laughed as she walked away. He called after her that he had plenty of time. Then he sat down and began to worry. He knew if he was going to marry her, he was going to have to ask her out.

The next half-hour made him think his watch battery had leaked acid into the gears. But when she finally did reappear, he wished he'd had longer to psych himself up. She wore a white tennis-court skirt and a red top. Her hair was damp. The clothes he could handle, but the wet hair was too much, particularly because it was so dark to begin with. Black hair on a pale-skinned Caucasian was something that he didn't normally see in nature. It was little things like that in a woman that got him. He stood up and almost fell over. She giggled and apologized for the tenth time for keeping him waiting. He shrugged. He was cool. He told her he had plenty of time. Again.

She explained she was not very good at interviews. He said he wasn't, either. She laughed, and he realized he had told a joke. Together they sat on a pile of gymnastic mats. He pulled out his recorder and pointed the mike in her direction. It was a sad testament to the emptiness of his life that he had to fight to keep his hands from trembling. She followed his movements with the sweetest brown eyes he had ever seen. Now it was her eyes he was in love with. Her hair had begun to dry. It was only dark brown, he told himself.

He began to start the interview, but he couldn't think of a single question to ask an astronaut who was going to Mars. He just blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

'What's your phone number?' he asked.

Lauren smiled and reached over and turned off his recorder. 'I'll write it down,' she said.

But that's why I've stopped here, Terry thought, a couple of miles shy of the cabin. She can always write it down again for another guy. On Mars she could give it to an alien for all I would know.

Yet Terry trusted Lauren. She was completely loyal. He just didn't trust the reasons why she was loyal to him. There didn't seem to be any. Oh, he was funny and nice and took a shower every morning, and stuff like that. But nowadays half the young girls in the country were dreaming about growing up like Dr Lauren Wagner, while he was nobody, with as much chance of having his cockroach story nominated for the Pulitzer as Ricky had of getting a date

with the teenage girl of his dreams. Terry really was like his cockroach. He was constantly waiting to be stepped on. Years ago, someone had stepped on him when he had passed out drunk at the county fair. It had made a deep impression on him. He had woken up with a broken nose.

Lauren went out with him just once and knew he was an alcoholic, even though he abstained from alcohol for twenty-four hours before their date. She was straightforward: she told him she liked him, but if he kept drinking, she wouldn't speak to him again. And she promised him that she would know if he drank, and the way she said it, he knew she would know. So he stopped. Simple as that. And Mars was the fourth planet from the sun, and they lived on the third planet from the sun, and his woman was going to fly to Mars in a spaceship, and be gone for two years. Yeah, it was very simple. Going sober had been hard. Her leaving was worse. He was proud of Lauren and all that, but he wished she had been the receptionist at Mission Control, and not the famous doctor jogging in the gym.

Terry got back in his car and drove toward the cabin. It was getting dark; he flipped on the lights. Between the thick trees he caught a glimpse of the flat shadow that was the lake. He loved Wyoming. His parents had left him the cabin when they had died together in a plane crash shortly after his twenty-first birthday. That was one thing he had in common with Lauren. She had lost both her parents in a car crash, when she too was only twenty-one - in her first year of medical school. Jennifer was only two at the time. Terry was proud of Lauren for a lot of reasons. If he'd had to raise a little sister from scratch, he wouldn't have been able to hold a job at McDonald's. She amazed him, she really did. He wanted to write a book about her someday.

Terry was reaching for the radio dial when he heard the gunshots. The first one made him jerk the car onto the shoulder of the road. The two did nothing to settle his nerves. He figured they must be from hunters, but he stepped on the gas. When he finally rounded the final mountain turn, and saw Jennifer in the front of his cabin playing with her friend, he was amazed at the intensity of the relief that washed through him. He hated guns. He even hated fireworks. He figured he must have been in dozens of battles in his past lives. Not that he believed in such things, but it kept him from thinking he was a natural neurotic. He parked and got out. Jennifer raced over and jumped in his arms, almost knocking him over.

'Terry! We've been waiting for you all day. This is my friend. Do you know each other?'

'Sure,' Terry said. 'Hi, Danny. It's been a long time.'

Daniel shook his hand. 'Yes, sir. I'm surprised you remembered my name.'

'I have a good memory for names,' Terry said. Jennifer continued to hug him, a bundle of yellow hair, and God, it was good to hold her. Jennifer had to be the brightest kid he had ever met. Sometimes when he looked at her, he found himself peeking over his shoulder to see who had turned on the spotlight. The kid had charisma, and it was a shame she hid it behind a reserved character. Terry didn't think even Lauren knew how much the expedition had Jennifer worried. Hell, just thinking about it made him sick to his stomach. He didn't trust technology, not when he couldn't pronounce the names of half the devices they had aboard their ship.

'And I never forget a newspaper boy,' Terry added. 'I work for a newspaper myself.'

"That's what Lauren was saying,' Daniel said.

'He's a great writer,' Jennifer said. 'He writes books about time travel and cockroaches and stuff.'

'I hate cockroaches,' Daniel said.

'You just haven't met the ones in Terry's book,' Jennifer said.

'Hey, Danny,' Terry said. 'Was that your gun I heard?'

The boy hesitated. 'Yes, sir. I'm sorry if it bothered you. I was just shooting at cans.'

'That type of shooting doesn't bother me. Jenny, where's Lauren?'

'She went to put her clothes on,' Daniel said. He winced. 'I mean...

Terry laughed. 'I know what you mean.'

'I'm sure you do,' a soft voice chuckled behind him.

He turned, and Lauren smiled warmly and walked toward him. She wore white shorts, a damp T-shirt. The last few days in the sun had given her a tan that he wished she could carry with her to Mars. Her figure was excellent. Although on the short side, she moved with the confidence of a person who didn't know what it was like to lose, which had intimidated him at first, but which now turned him on. She had Jennifer's great mouth, wide and full of white teeth. She came close to having the little girl's radiant smile, which was saying a lot. Yet, otherwise, the two did not look alike. Lauren was cute. Jennifer was beautiful. Terry had decided long ago he could handle the balance in his life.

She's been swimming. Her hair's wet. God.

Lauren's hair was straight, cut short, with bangs that reached to her eyebrows. She wiggled her nose at him as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

'Nice of you to drop by,' she said, kissing him.

Terry shrugged. 'I was in the neighborhood.'

Lauren glanced at staring Daniel and Jennifer. 'What are you two looking at?'

Jennifer giggled. Daniel said hastily, 'I better be on my way. I'll come by tomorrow before you leave, Jenny.'

'Come early,' Terry said. 'We're leaving at six.'

'I'll be here before then,' Daniel said firmly. He touched Jennifer's shoulder awkwardly.

'Be sure to come,' Jennifer said.

'I will,' Daniel said.

'Promise?'

'Yes.' He squeezed her hand and collected the rifle hidden in the shadowy trees. He waved as he rode off on his bike.

'Seems like a nice young man,' Terry said.

'No taste in women,' Lauren remarked. 'Where are we going to eat tonight? I'm starved.'

'We'll let Jenny decide,' Terry said. Jennifer was staring in the direction of the road, where Daniel had disappeared. 'Jenny?'

'I'm not hungry,' she mumbled. 'Would it be OK if I stayed here?'

'Daniel must be coming back later,' Lauren said mischievously. But Jennifer's mood had already shifted. Terry had seen it before. Yet her gloom was unlike that normally seen in

depressed people. It appeared more of a withdrawal from her surroundings than an attack of unhappiness.

'No,' Jennifer said softly, answering Lauren.

Lauren sensed the change, Terry could see that. She had learned from experience not to challenge it. 'Sure, honey,' Lauren said. 'If you want to stay, that's fine. But at least eat something later, OK? I'll stick a baked potato in the oven. There's chicken wings in the fridge from yesterday. There's salad fixings, too. I could make you one before we leave.'

'Don't bother,' Jennifer said. She stepped to the stump in front of the cabin and picked up a red-covered book.

'Well, there's yogurt and fruit,' Lauren said. 'If you want some of that later.'

'Maybe later,' Jennifer said, not interested. She opened her book and began to study the pages in the dark.

'We don't have to go out,' Terry said to Lauren.

Lauren hesitated a moment. 'Nonsense. Jenny's been babysitting Matthew's twins for two years. She can take care of herself. I have to go into isolation the day after tomorrow. This will be my last date for two years.'

Terry smiled. 'Unless the Martians take a fancy to you. Get dressed. Casual. We'll eat at Russo's. He told me his son, Mike, is just dying to meet the famous woman astronaut.'



Lauren went inside the cabin. Terry went to the stump where Jennifer sat reading. It was amazing she could make out a word in the dark. She didn't seem to notice that she had company. A minute passed. Finally, he said, 'A good book?'

Jennifer closed the book and hugged the front cover to her chest. 'Terry? Where do stories come from?'

'Huh?'

'Where do the writers get them?'

Terry knelt beside her, noticing the silence of the surrounding forest. Venus shone bright in the western sky. Lauren had pointed it out to him once. He used to think it was an airplane or a star or a balloon. Actually, he never used to think about the sky at all.

'No one really knows for certain,' he said. 'But I would say stories come from inside us, from the accumulation of our experiences.'

'From our memories?' Jennifer asked.

'Yes. When I write, the people I create often resemble those I know, or used to know. But their thoughts, they are usually mine alone.'

'But you write so many different characters.'

'I must have many different people inside me.'

Jennifer considered. 'But you don't believe in the books you write, do you? They're only stories. They don't mean anything.'

'Sure, they're make-believe. But I like to think they have some truth in them. Usually I enjoy the world I'm writing in more than the world I live in.'

A smile touched her lips. But the smile didn't last, slipping from her face as something cold blew across her thoughts. She looked up at the dark sky. 'Terry? Could a story come from outside?'

'Yeah. Once I saw a kid stuck in a tree and a bunch of other kids below making fun of him, and it got me thinking about a book where ... Wait a second. What exactly do you mean by outside?'

He never did get to find out what she meant. Lauren came out of the cabin then. But the reason he'd asked Jennifer to clarify her question was because of the way she'd said the word outside. It had been as if she had been talking about way outside, like on another planet. It spooked him for some reason, and he was not the superstitious type.

'Let's go, boyfriend.' Lauren hurried toward them, all the while brushing her hair. She had put on brown slacks and a yellow blouse. Terry stood reluctantly. He would have liked to talk to Jennifer longer.

T put two small potatoes in the oven,' Lauren continued. 'In case you change your mind. Remember the chicken in the icebox. Please try to eat something.'

Jennifer nodded but remained seated. 'Maybe later.'

Lauren leaned over and kissed her cheek. 'We'll probably be in before eleven, but if you get tired, don't wait up. We have a long drive ahead of us tomorrow.' They were driving,

not flying back to Houston. Lauren said she wanted to look at the highways, because they wouldn't

have them on Mars. Personally, Terry hated long drives. He had flown up just for the night. Lauren poked him in the side. 'I want to drive tonight,' she said.

Terry handed her the keys. 'I'll be with you in a moment,' he said. Lauren left to start the car. Once again, he was alone with Jennifer. He fluffed up her beautiful hair. 'I'll wake you when I get up. You'll have time to spend with Danny.'

Jennifer grasped his hand as he started to walk away. She stared at Lauren behind the wheel of the car. 'She shouldn't go there,' Jennifer whispered.

Terry sighed. 'I wish she wasn't.' He kissed her on the cheek. 'Goodbye, Princess.'

'Goodbye, Terry.'

Terry walked towards the car and climbed inside. Lauren gunned the engine, and the serenity of the forest fled. He kept his eyes on Jennifer as they drove away. He thanked God they weren't both leaving.

### THREE

Jennifer Wagner sat for a long time after Terry and Lauren left. It got darker. Presently the moon rose over the lake. A breeze stirred, and she watched the moonbeams dance on the water. They reminded her of something she had seen long ago. What it was, though, she couldn't say. She began to feel cold, decided to go inside and build a fire. On Mars, Lauren said, it was always cold, and fire could not burn in the open.

Jennifer liked flames.

Her book in hand, Jennifer went to the rear of the cabin, where Terry kept a woodpile. Her own tiny cabin was also in the back. It had been a storage shed a couple of years ago, but Terry had converted it for her, putting in a bathroom and a bed. She liked privacy, where she could read undisturbed. Plus she hated to be a nuisance when Lauren and Terry wanted to be alone. She knew about sex and stuff like that. She could hardly wait until they got married. She would be Lauren's bridesmaid. She wondered who would be Terry's best man. He didn't have many friends, not that she knew of. But the wedding wouldn't be for a couple of years. Not until Lauren returned from Mars. She had meant it when she had told Terry she wished Lauren wasn't going there.

Jennifer was afraid something very bad was going to happen to Lauren on Mars.

She picked up a log and walked into the cabin. She came back twice more; the logs were heavy - she could only carry one at a time. But she bet Daniel could have lifted all three at once, in one arm even. She wished Lauren hadn't been joking when she had said that he was sneaking back later on. They could have talked, and maybe have gone for a walk under the stars. It was a shame.

Because now she had no excuse not to read the book.

Why do I have to read it? It's only a story.

Jennifer tossed the third and final log in the fireplace and took hold of two dry sticks from the basket of kindling by the hearth. She seldom needed a match or a lighter to start a fire. Terry and Lauren were always amazed at how easily she got the flames going. Lauren had said long ago that if Smokey the Bear knew of her skills, he would brain her with his shovel. But that had been when Jennifer was younger and believed in talking bears. Nowadays Lauren accused her of being a pyromaniac. Jennifer, however, was always careful with fire. She respected it deeply.

Jennifer began to rub the sticks together, humming a melody she often repeated when she was alone. She did not know where she had learned the song, although she might have heard it on the radio. Quickly the sticks began to heat. In a few seconds she had smoke, and then a tiny orange flame, which she fed with scraps of bark from the sides of the logs. The bark was dry; the logs caught fast. The chill melted off her skin like mud disappeared from her feet in a running stream. Jennifer smiled.

She really loved fires.

Jennifer moved close to the logs and stared at the flames. The warmth that came from them always had a soothing effect on her. She blinked in the warm light and her mind began to drift. There was another funny thing about fire. The longer she stared into it, the more colors she saw. There were greens and blues and purples, pulsating on and off, deep within the yellow flames. Once Jennifer had asked Lauren about them and Lauren said she must be seeing the burn-off of residual chemicals on the logs. Jennifer wasn't sure Lauren was right. Sometimes the pulsating colors took on the faint shapes of faces. They were never people she knew, but they looked like people she thought she should know.

Jennifer shifted still closer to the fire, wanting to touch it. Of course, she knew, the idea was childish and dangerous. Yet she occasionally wondered what it would be like to be immersed in flames, and not burn. She was not certain, even after all this time of growing up, whether fire had to burn every time, or everybody.

Quickly, Jennifer waved her hand through the fire. If you were fast, it missed you. She slashed her hand above the logs again, and then again and again, slowing down a fraction of a second with each try. It was a game she often played. It was fun. The flames never hurt her. Nevertheless, Jennifer suspected there was a limit beyond which she shouldn't slew down. And it wasn't just because she might get burned. Something else might happen. She could feel the something else in the same way she could see the colored sparks and the faint faces - just between what she believed was real, and what might be imagination, in a slippery part of the mind she could never quite grasp. But this something else - she didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Jennifer sat back and looked at the red book waiting on the couch. That was exactly how she felt - it was waiting for her, like a story that had been written for her eyes alone.

Some love story, she thought sarcastically. But she'd had to lie to Lauren. Had she told Lauren the truth, her sister might have told her not to read it. Lauren worried about what Jennifer put in her head because of her nightmares. But the book had to be read, Jennifer felt certain of that. There were things that had to be known, terrible things.

But why? Jennifer thought. She did not know. The colored faces in the fire did not know either, or if they did, they were not telling her. The whole thing had her confused. She knew things she didn't really know; she sensed the knowledge. She felt things no one else seemed to feel.

The colors in the fire began to fade. Jennifer sat back from the logs and tried to think happy thoughts. While Lauren was gone, Terry's new book would come out. A million people would read it, and he would become rich and famous. Jennifer wanted Terry to be successful. She thought it would make him happy. She wondered: if she wrote a book, would it make her happy? Sometimes she felt as if she knew a story, a very old story, that no one else knew. But when she concentrated on the people in the story, they blurred, just like the faces in the fire did when she leaned too close to the flames. One thing for certain, though. The people in her story knew about the power of fire.

Like the people in the book on the couch.

Jennifer looked over at it again. She knew - it was another one of those things she sensed was true - that the people in the book should have used fire against the enemy, and nothing else. They shouldn't have used the terrible things, those things that made such a mess. Those things didn't work very well. The enemy just kept coming.

Jennifer suddenly noticed the logs were almost all gone. Burned to ash by the fire.

Have hours gone by? That's impossible. I was just sitting here and thinking.

Yet it was true. The flames were dying. The room was cold. It didn't seem fair. Every time she looked at the colored faces and tried to remember the story in her head, she would lose a slice of her life. It seemed doubly unfair to her at the moment because she didn't want to go out in the dark and cold for more logs. She was afraid something would get her. She was in high school, but she still believed in monsters. She often dreamed about them. They always took the forms of snakes and lizards. Except they walked and talked like people.

Jennifer stood and went into Lauren's bedroom, where she put on a warm sweater. Then she returned to the front room and sat on the couch. The last of the flames flickered out. At last she was alone with her book. She picked it up reluctantly. She wondered where the author had gotten his story. That's what she had been trying to ask Terry. Was it from outside? The real outside?

Jennifer flipped open the book and began to read. She wasn't at the spot where she had left off, but the rest did not matter. The doctor was discussing how to destroy the enemy. But did he really know what he was talking about when he lectured the other people on the enemy's weakness? Jennifer had her doubts. He was a good man, but even good men could be tricked by lies, and be lulled into a false sense of security.

Jennifer knew what liars the enemy were.

Jennifer finished the page and began to read the next. Then she began to feel sick. She was having trouble breathing. The full implications of what they were planning hit her with striking clarity. No! She could never do that! She would die first. She would just as soon burn.

Please, God, no.

Jennifer Wagner began to scream. She screamed, knowing no one could hear her, until she fainted.

## FOUR

The meal had been tasty. Lasagna for him. Swordfish for Lauren. They shared a lemon mist cake for dessert. They were both stuffed. The candles on their corner table burned low. Except for the two of them, the restaurant was empty. Soon it would be time to go. But Terry had yet to unwind. He continued to feel uptight, and he wondered if it was from the day's travels or from the caffeine in the coffee he was drinking. He was on his fourth cup. He couldn't believe this was the last civilized meal they were going to have together for two years. The food had been great, but the dinner had depressed him. He wished Jennifer had come.

A long silence had settled between them.

'What are you thinking, Terry?' Lauren asked finally, playing with the two-carat diamond engagement ring he had given her six months after they had met. The light of the candles quivered in her brown eyes. Terry lifted his coffee cup and took a disinterested sip.

'The usual,' he said.

'It's a long time,' she said. 'For you.'

'Yeah,' Terry agreed. Lauren would be fast asleep during almost the entire voyage to and from Mars. She would only be awake for forty days all told. Terry wished he could find a hibernator somewhere. He had already

checked in the yellow pages for one.



'I won't tell you to write,' Lauren said, letting go of the ring. 'Not letters. But I do want to read another one of your books when I get home. Have you decided what you're going to do next?'

He shrugged. 'Something with a happy ending.'

'Ricky had a happy ending. He didn't get stepped on.'

'Yeah. But he was a cockroach. They don't live long. He probably died right after my last page.'

'We're cheery tonight,' Lauren said.

'I'm sorry.'

'I read your article this evening. I liked it.'

'Really? Tom told me to write it.' Tom Brenner was his partner at the paper. They had a good relationship: they both hated their jobs. Tom wanted to be president of a Fortune Five Hundred company. He didn't care what the product was, as long as he got to order people around and had secretaries that longed to sharpen his pencil while sitting on his lap. Terry went on, 'I don't know why. It should have just been a filler. I didn't say anything that hasn't been said a million times before. Except for maybe my slant on insanity. What did you think of that?'

Lauren hesitated. 'I got interrupted at that part. How did you develop it?'

'I said the Russians lost their marbles because they were cooped up for too long without women.'

Lauren laughed. She laughed at all his jokes, even the ones that weren't funny. He liked that quality in a woman. 'You're kidding?'

'Well, actually I combined the points of infection and insanity. I said Dmitri and his men got sick and murdered each other.'

'What about Carl Bensk in orbit?'

Terry drank more coffee. 'That guy's always a problem. I said that the infection might have been potent enough to cross the hundred miles of space.'

Lauren frowned. 'You could have done better than that.'

Terry waved his hand. 'I know all the arguments against it. But I don't think you scientists have any imagination. In my book, if you have an alien infection, anything goes.'

'Life can't exist in a vacuum,' Lauren said.

'Life as we know it.'

'Ah - I love that phrase. It doesn't say anything. But forget space. Mars itself is hostile enough. The air pressure there is ten millibars. Earth's is a thousand millibars. In such a rarefied atmosphere, water cannot exist. It vaporizes or freezes. No water, no life.'

Terry regarded his half-empty cup of coffee and wondered how much of it was water. Mr Russo could cook, but he had trouble boiling water. 'Your remark doesn't alter my opinion in the slightest,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Because I don't know what a millibar is.'

Lauren laughed.

He went on, 'I thought you said you liked my article?'

'I liked the way it was written. But I've read too much stuff lately that tries to dramatize the situation. Think of all the people who are going to be disappointed when nothing far out happens.'

Terry was not surprised with her remark. Lauren always denied the enigma surrounding the disappearance of the Russians. To her the Russians were simply lousy engineers. t 'I, for one, believe in Martians,' he said. 'You can only find what you're looking for. If you don't know what the aliens look like, they could be standing right in front of you and you wouldn't see them.'

Lauren chuckled. 'Jim said something like that the other day.'

Jim was Professor James Ranoth, world-famous geologist and archaeologist. He was second in command of Lauren's mission. The guy was always nice, which would have annoyed Terry if Jim hadn't been so easygoing at the same time. But Terry thought Jim, at fifty-two, was kind of old to be going to Mars.

'What did he say?' Terry asked.

'He wondered if our guardian angels would become visible to us once we were on Mars.'

'Does he believe in angels?'

'I'm sure he was just joking,' Lauren said.

Lauren was an atheist. Terry had tried to convert her to one of the popular religions - he didn't really care which one - but being a lapsed Catholic himself, he had failed miserably. But even though he joked about the subject with Lauren, her total lack of belief in a higher power disturbed him. He didn't know about Jesus and rising on the third day and that routine, but he liked to think that in the end everything was going to work out for the best. It gave him a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Besides, Lauren was such a mysterious creature, he didn't see how she could deny a grand mystery for the universe and be true to herself.

'I believe in angels,' Terry said. 'I believe in you.'

She smiled at the remark, but then turned thoughtful. 'You know, I'm as anxious as anyone to learn what became of the Russians. Maybe Carl Bensk is still alive. It's possible. Remotely possible.'

'What about those on the planet?'

Lauren shook her head. 'No way.' She paused. 'Did I tell you I met Commander Dmitri once?'

He was surprised. 'No.'

'He was in Florida a year before I met you. He reminded me of Jim - intelligent, warm. It's sad.'

'Does the Nova have room to take Carl home?'

'No, of course not. We only have six hibernaculums. But we can be flexible.'

The talk of death did not sit well with Terry. 'Yeah,' he said with a trace of bitterness. 'Knowing NASA, you'll draw straws.'

'There's no wood aboard the Nova,' Lauren said flatly. She turned away and stared across the empty restaurant, frowning. Terry sensed the source of her trouble before she spoke. 'Sometimes I ask myself how I can just go off and leave her for so long.'

Terry sighed to himself. It was a good question. But he had a good answer. Lauren was driven to go Mars. It was her destiny to go - so the atheist believed - and she didn't care what it cost to fulfill it. No, that was not fair. She did care, yet she was willing to pay the price anyway. But Terry kept his thoughts to himself. Making her feel more guilty than she already did would solve nothing.

Terry knew Lauren often wondered why she had been picked in front of so many other qualified doctors. In fact, of the five finalists for the job, she had been the least qualified. Although a board-certified surgeon - a remarkable feat for a thirty-two-year-old female who had been raising a baby sister - she had few years of clinical experience; she had begun chasing her dream of being an astronaut at the very beginning of her residency. But Terry had another good answer for why NASA had chosen her, although it was another thing he kept to himself. She was capable - he had no doubts in that regard - but more important from his cynical point of view, she was attractive and personable. She did more for NASA's public relations than the rest of the crew combined. At a time when the public was bitching about the expedition's price tag - in the

neighborhood of two hundred billion, depending on who you believed - Lauren was worth her weight in gold. Since she had done the talk-show circuit two months ago, she had been overwhelmed with fan mail. He had read some of it. It was nice to think he had a girl so many guys wanted, But he was looking forward to the day he got his own fan mail.

Dear Mr Hayes,

I'm a cockroach in Fairfield, Iowa. I live in the wall of a farm house, just outside Des Moines, behind the icebox. I can't tell you how much it meant to me when Ricky's lover didn't step on him. You've changed my life, Mr Hayes.

'Jenny and I will be together the whole time, and she'll get by,' he said. 'She's got more going for her than either of us know. How many thirteen-year-old girls have a boyfriend?'

Lauren smiled faintly. 'Daniel.' It was a brief smile. 'She's a strange girl, Jennifer.'

'That's good,' he said.

'You think so? I don't.'

'You want her to be like everyone else?'

'Yes,' Lauren said. 'Everyone else is fine.'

'So is Jenny. She's just sensitive. All us geniuses are.'

'She's been having nightmares.'

Terry sat up. 'They've returned?'

'Yes,' Lauren said.

'Are they bad?'

'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'What kind of nightmares are they?'

Lauren shook her head and plucked a white rose from the vase at the center of the table.  
'She doesn't talk about

them. I don't think it's a big deal. I don't know why I brought it up.'

Just then, Mr Russo, the owner of the restaurant, walked over. Terry had known him for years. He was a character. He had been born in northern Italy, but had only come to the United States in his mid-thirties. Since then he had been trying to deny his heritage, although everything about him - his accent, his mannerisms, even his business - advertised the fact of his Italian origin. Terry would talk to him about something, and he would start to get all excited and animated, gesturing with his hands, practically spelling out *mama mia!* in the air. Then he would suddenly realize what he was doing and press his hands to his sides, and lower his voice, and only then continue the conversation. Indeed, he named his restaurant Russo's, and told everybody that was his name, but he was really a Giovanni. Terry figured he must be hiding out from a Sicilian godfather. He looked like a godfather himself. He was big and round. He liked his own cooking.

'Mr Hayes! Always a pleasure to see you.' Mr Russo shook Terry's hand enthusiastically. 'How was your meal?'

'Great,' Terry said. 'We ate it all and feel... great. Are we keeping you from locking up?'

'Nonsense. The waiters - they have already gone home. So I am here alone, and for me, there is no late hour.' He turned to Lauren, bowing slightly and taking her hand in his, just like they did in the old country. 'And tonight is, after all, a special occasion. Miss Wagner, my sincerest > wishes for the success of your long journey, and especially for your safe return.'

Lauren blushed. Despite being in the national spotlight, she was shy around strangers. 'If only we had your cooking aboard the Nova, Earth would not seem so far away,' she said.

'You're so kind,' Mr Russo said graciously. He began to remove something from the inside of his coat. 'Miss Wagner, if I may be so bold.'

'Lauren,' she said.

'Lauren, yes, we are all friends. Now I imagine you must be asked this all the time. I hate to ask you myself.'

Lauren smiled. 'For an autograph?'

'Yes. My boy, Michael, he is fourteen years old this summer, and he talks about nothing but space, and rocket ships, and going to Mars. He is a fine boy, he helps me when he can. I told him you had come in with Mr Hayes, and he begged me for an introduction.'



'I would be happy to meet him,' Lauren said.

Mr Russo started to throw his arms toward the ceiling before he remembered which country he was now living in. Terry chuckled to himself as Mr Russo folded his arms across his chest.

'You don't know what you would be letting yourself in for,' Mr Russo said. 'My boy, he would talk your head off. He has a bigger mouth than his papa - his father. But no, he has school tomorrow, and I sent him home early. I didn't want to intrude upon your last night out together. But I promised him I would ask if you could possibly sign his picture.'

'Sure,' Lauren said.

Mr Russo beamed. From inside his coat he withdrew an undersized rolled-up poster and gave it to Lauren. She undid the print and laughed. It was a picture of the Nova, taken from high Earth orbit, looking down on an incredibly blue Pacific.

Personally, Terry thought the ship was ugly. It was all spheres and rotating hammer-like arms. He would have liked a couple of sleek wings and several spacious view

windows. He didn't know what idiot had thought up the name. It was so fifties sci-fi. At least they had called the Martian lander something that had personality - the Hawk.

'I thought you meant a picture of myself,' Lauren said, explaining her laughter. 'Why, that's a fine shot of our ship. I've never seen it before.'

'He keeps it under a plastic cover on the inside of his school notebook,' Mr Russo said. He produced a pen. 'You are so kind.'

'Michael,' Lauren muttered, beginning the note, no doubt a note she had written a thousand times before.

Mr Russo sighed. 'He will treasure this.'

Lauren paused. 'I feel a bit funny writing him a personal message when I haven't even seen your son. Do you have Michael's picture?'

'Certainly.' Mr Russo pulled out a wallet that unraveled into a dozen pictures of his son: baby Michaels; birthday Michaels; boring Michaels. He gave one to Lauren.

She grinned. 'He's cute.'

'Better be careful,' Terry said to Mr Russo, keeping a straight face. 'Lauren might be checking him out for her sister.'

Mr Russo got excited. 'I met her once. A magnificent child. Her eyes - they belong to an angel. Lauren, that picture of my boy, you must keep it for her.'

Lauren flushed. 'I really don't know if Jenny is old enough for me to be-'

'Who knows?' Mr Russo interrupted. 'Kids grow up fast. Maybe in a year or two she will take a fancy to him. What could it hurt? No?'

Lauren nodded. 'You're right, Mr Russo. What could it hurt?' She put the photograph in her purse.

Terry had met Michael several times. He didn't stand a chance next to Daniel. Like his father, he ate too many pizzas, and was pudgy, whereas Daniel was built like Tarzan.

Lauren finished her note on the back of the poster and handed it to Mr Russo. He read the words aloud.

"'Today, Michael, my generation travels to Mars. Tomorrow, yours will reach for the stars. Signed: Lauren Wagner, M.D., First American Expedition.'" Very inspirational!

'Thank you,' Lauren said.

Terry thought of the long drive tomorrow, and the day after that, and started to get up. 'It was a fine evening, Mr Russo,' he said. 'But we really must be on our way.'

Mr Russo gestured apologetically. 'I'm as bad as my boy. Talking away.' He helped Lauren with her chair.

Terry reached for his wallet. 'Could I get the bill?'

Mr Russo looked exasperated. 'How can I charge a famous American hero? No, certainly not. Put your money away. It is no good here.' He took the white rose that Lauren had left on their table and presented it to her. 'This has been a great honor. Again, my prayers for your safe return.'

Lauren leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. Mr Russo's eyes opened. 'Thank you,' she said. 'You're very kind.'

Mr Russo brushed aside her praise. 'When you return, we will celebrate together. Promise me your first dinner out together will be here?'

'We promise,' Terry said. They shook hands.

'We will slaughter the fatted calf,' Mr Russo said. 'Only the finest for America's hero.'

Lauren played with her rose. 'I will save my appetite. Give my best to your son.'

Terry knew Lauren would want a change of menu. The fatted calf - she never ate red meat.

FIVE

Parking near the cabin, they saw that the light in the front window was still on.

'Think she's up?' Terry asked.

'She's probably reading,' Lauren said. 'She probably hasn't gone to her own room yet.'

'A pity,' Terry said. He reached over and pulled her into his arms. They started to kiss, lightly at first, then hard. Lauren tasted the coffee he had drunk with his meal. She liked coffee. She liked the feel of his hands on her body. Terry had the greatest hands in the world, and not just for lovemaking. It had been one of the things that had drawn her to him in the first place. He had a subtle way of gesturing as he talked that made what he was saying appear ridiculous, even when he was being serious. He did it on purpose, he said. He didn't want to be taken seriously, because, he said, all of life was a joke. Of course, he had probably been joking when he made the remark.

He was the craziest guy Lauren had ever met. Once he had come to a meeting of the entire Nova crew, where they talked at length about what they would do if any number of emergencies struck. Terry had sat there and listened without saying a word until their commander - Colonel William Brent - had asked Terry if he felt they were being overly cautious. Terry had looked at him and said seriously, 'What if you get to Mars and you're there for a couple of days and you start to get bored? What if you get so bored you begin to wonder why you went there in the first place? What are you going to do then?'

Colonel Brent hadn't smiled. Word had it that he had given up on the habit. 'I hardly see how that would make one bit of difference.'

'Real bored people have been known to have their minds play tricks on them,' Terry had warned. 'You could start seeing things that aren't there. It's not as though you can come home anytime you want, you know.'

'Do you honestly feel this is a danger?' Colonel Brent had asked.

'Nah,' Terry had said with a laugh. 'I was just hoping maybe I could get you guys to call the whole thing off.'

He's going to miss me. Boy am I going to miss him.

Lauren's big problem with men, until she met Terry, had been boredom. She'd worried about it. Did she get fed up so quickly with the men she dated because she was an egotistical feminist bitch who thought she was better than everyone who wore a penis full time? Being with Terry had taught her that she simply needed the bizarre to stay excited. She shouldn't have been surprised, he said. Anybody who had dreamed about going to Mars since they were five years old was pretty bizarre themselves. Terry had helped her to understand that she could be special without being alone. She had often felt lonely until she met him. Right from the start, though, she had felt that he had always been a part of her life.

Few women would have said Terry was handsome. His sandy hair was thinning and he needed to gain twenty pounds to reach a normal weight. He also had a habit of

squinting when he was thinking and consequently had more lines around his eyes than a thirty-eight-year-old man who seldom went out in the sun deserved. But he had style, and not just in the way he gestured. He had a cockiness in his laugh and a twinkle in his eye that made her feel she could trust him with her nastiest thoughts and deepest hopes at the same time. He also loved to love her for hours on end. He never got bored with her. It didn't matter what he ate or drank beforehand - he always tasted sweet.

'This is fun,' she said as he kissed her some more.

'It's getting funner,' he agreed.

Lauren shifted her weight and leaned back. Terry fell on top of her. The front seat was terribly cramped, but that was all right. She knew how much he loved to do it in cars, especially rented ones. He once told her that the smell of all the other people who had driven the car, especially the different perfumes of the women, excited him. He had this fantasy that all those people were actually there watching them when they did it, which Lauren thought was pretty kinky.

Terry opened the button on her pants and fiddled with her zipper, which appeared to be stuck. She started to help him, until she remembered her orders.

'Terry?' she said.

'Hmmm?' He was working on the zipper, and having a hard time. She expected him to use his teeth on it next. Lauren took a deep breath. Her orders, what were her orders?

'Terry. The Antabolene.'

'Who?' he muttered, uninterested. Finally, he was successful, and zipped down her fly, slipping his hand over her bare hip. His touch was always gentle, yet firm, too, which she liked. She couldn't remember the last time she

had turned him down, if there had ever been a time. It was a pity it would have to be tonight.

The Antabolene was the drug that would be fed into her system aboard the Nova. It induced a reduced metabolic rate and was the key to hibernation. As a prelude to the Antabolene's intake, the doctors at NASA had forbidden her to take oral contraceptives. Biochemical variables had to be kept to a minimum, they said. They didn't know Terry. She realized if she didn't stop him immediately she might end up getting pregnant and having a baby on Mars. Oh, but she liked how he rubbed her there, right there...

'Terry. Terry, wait a second.'

'Huh?' He glanced up from his four-handed exploration of her body. Lauren took the opportunity to try to pull up her pants, but rolled off the seat and fell on the floor, where she ended up straddling the stick shift. Terry peered at her in the moonlight. 'What are you doing down there?' he asked.

'I was talking about the Antabolene. They told me to throw away this month's pills.'

'And you did what they said?'

'Of course.'

'I read once the odds are no better than a hundred to one. For doing it just once, that is.'

'It depends on the time of the month.'

'I was speaking of averages,' he said.

Lauren crawled onto the seat and playfully shoved him away. 'I've always defied the odds.'

Terry sighed. 'Now I'll never be able to get to sleep.'

'We'll go for a walk and burn off the energy.'

He tugged at her pants. 'That never works. Now a hundred to one, those are pretty good odds.'

Lauren opened the car door and slipped from reach. 'We'll take a long walk,' she said sweetly.

'Damn. Do I get a rain check?'

'In two years I'll give you Master Charge.'

Later they strolled along the shore of the lake, the same shore she had raced over earlier. The night was cool but pleasant. An idyllic breeze rustled the forest. The moon sparkled on the rippling water. They walked slowly, saying little. Lauren derived much



contentment from the simple act of holding his hand. Only when they reached the stream did they pause. Lauren took off her shoes and dipped a toe.

'It's cold,' she said.

'The whole lake is,' Terry said.

'I know.' Lauren let go his hand and rolled up her pants to her knees. 'This evening I went swimming way out. It was fun. Hey, Terry, let's cross over to the other side.'

'Don't you remember what happened last time?'

'I promise I won't slip,' she said.

'Sure. I think it's unnatural for a modern man to take off his shoes when he's outside. Go ahead if you want, but I'm staying here.'

Lauren stepped into the icy current, feeling marble-smooth stones beneath her feet. The stream was colder than the lake. Quickly her toes turned numb. She hurried across and climbed onto a boulder. Terry sat on a big rock across from her.

'How was Houston?' she asked, squeezing her feet in her hands, trying to warm them.

'Not bad. But I hated to leave here when we have such little time together left. Tom's been kind of bugging me lately. He wants me to write an article about the reporters who cover the astronauts.'

'An article on him?' Lauren asked.

'I think so. What did you do while I was gone?'

'Talked to Jenny. Went for long walks. Waited for you to

come back.' She listened for a moment to the breeze in the trees the lapping of the water on the sand. 'It's so peaceful here,' she whispered.

'Yes. I'm glad they don't launch the shuttle here.'

'Terry? Did you hear what Daniel said? About a girl drowning in the lake last week?'

Terry showed interest. 'No. Who was it?'

'I don't know. Daniel said she was his age. He figured she swam out too far and got cramps.'

'Let that be a warning to you. Was Jenny there when he said this?'

'Yes. Why?'

'I want her to be careful swimming alone when you're gone.'

'She never goes out far,' Lauren said.

'Still. I wonder who the kid was. It could be the Jeffersons' little girl. Christ, I hope it wasn't her.'

'Maybe the girl's family was just passing through,' Lauren said.

'All the same, it's a shame.'

'Yeah,' Lauren agreed. On that note their conversation faltered. She still carried her white rose, and fingered it gently while she looked up at the moon. Suddenly, for no reason, she began to feel small and frail. The moon was bright, but the darkness beyond it - it went on forever. And there she was going.

Where it's always cold. Where there's no fire.

Lauren shook her head. She didn't know why her mind was suddenly infatuated with the thought of fire. She had been thinking about it ever since her nightmare.

Her toes were still cold. She stood and threw her white rose in the stream and watched as the lake swallowed it. 'Let's get out of here,' she said. 'Let's go see how Jenny's doing.'

They found Jennifer unconscious on the couch, her face buried beneath her long blond hair.

'She must have been waiting up for us,' Terry said, closing the door carefully.

'The poor dear,' Lauren said. She crossed to the couch and smoothed Jennifer's hair from her face. Her sister didn't stir. Jennifer's breathing was faint, which Lauren knew from experience to be normal for her. Yet Jennifer frowned as she slept, as if something troubled her in her sleep. Lauren noticed the red book on the floor beside the couch and picked it up. Then she frowned. She strode to where Terry stood.

'Some love story,' Lauren said sarcastically, showing him the title of the book.

'Is that what she told you she was reading?'

'Yes. Why would she lie to me?'

'She probably thought you wouldn't approve,' Terry said.

'I don't.'

'What does it matter? It's only a book.'

'I think it's garbage,' Lauren said. She glanced at her sister, bundled up in one of her own sweaters, and felt a stab of guilt at having left her alone. 'Terry? Would it be OK if I slept on the couch with Jenny?'

Terry grinned. 'You don't believe our walk burned off enough energy?'

Lauren leaned over and kissed him. 'I'm sure it improved our odds. But no, I just feel I should be with her.'

He hugged her. 'That's fine.'

'You don't mind?'

'Of course not. When we get married, we'll have to have a daughter like her.'

Lauren hugged him hard. 'If that's possible.'

'She is one of a kind.' He released her slowly. 'So are you. Thanks, Lauren.'

'For what?'

'The last two years.'

She felt tears coming, and was embarrassed, for she wasn't ordinarily a sentimental person. She turned quickly away lest he see her crying.

'Sweet dreams,' he said at her back, a trace of puzzlement, perhaps sadness, in his voice. 'Catch you early.'

She wiped at her eyes. 'Yeah.'

He was only a few minutes in the bathroom, and then disappeared into the bedroom. Lauren brushed her teeth quickly, and fetched an extra blanket and pillow from the closet. She was on the verge of lying down beside her sister when she noticed again the red-

covered book. Jennifer's eyes were closed, but behind them Lauren thought she saw another nightmare forming.

I'll tell her it got lost.

Lauren grabbed the book and tossed it in the fireplace. A bottle of lighter fluid stood nearby, and she squirted a generous amount over the book cover. A touch of her match and the pages went up in flames. She sat patiently until the book was hard to tell from the rest of the ash. Then, finally, she stirred the whole mess with a black metal prod, satisfied. The author's imaginative universe would not be coming back to haunt her sister.

Lauren took the pillow and blanket and settled on the couch. She fell asleep with her arms wrapped around Jennifer.

## SIX

Professor James Ranoth sat at his desk on the third story of the isolation complex. Outside his locked window, the Florida sky was turning to black as his last night on Earth began. His room was sparse, furnished mostly with boxes of books that would soon be going into storage, and lit by a small lamp that had bad wiring. It flickered when he touched it. The piece of paper lying on his desk was perfectly blank. He was trying to make out his will.

James Ranoth had seldom thought of dying. Death had always struck him as the least of life's worries. But he was going to Mars tomorrow, and it was best to be prepared. The problem confronting him, at present, and the reason his will was so far blank, was that he had no family. He had been raised an orphan and had never married. He was fifty-two, and had spent the greater part of his life in exotic countries, at archaeology digs, clawing in dirt with his bare hands. He felt no woman deserved the life he had led. Occasionally, however, he regretted his decision to remain single, particularly when he saw children playing in the park, running with their kites flapping in the blue sky. He had always had a special love for innocence. Perhaps that's why he had such an interest in ancient civilizations. Humanity as a whole had been young once.

Still, his life had few regrets, and none were painful. He had enjoyed a great deal of success. He'd published several books and won the Nobel Prize in the recently created category - 'General Science.' People thought he knew what he was talking about. He imagined he had an abundance of money he could leave some deserving soul in the event he did not return from Mars. There were the continuing royalties from his books, NASA's salary he never drew upon and of course the Nobel Prize money, which had been a pretty penny. But he had only a vague idea what it all amounted to. He had little interest in money. His bank paid his bills automatically and sent him a monthly allowance to live on.

Jim knew he shouldn't have left his will to the last moment. In fact, he probably should have set up a living trust. Someone had told him they were better than wills. But if he had little interest in wills, he had none in the law. Plus he had been so busy lately mastering the gadgets aboard Nova that were his responsibility. If only NASA had granted him a couple of days' vacation, as they had Lauren. They had probably worried he would take off to the other side of the world. He loved to travel. He'd walked across the Sahara, frozen on Antarctic beaches, and swum above the Great Barrier Reef. He was thankful he had been given the opportunity to enjoy so much of Earth's beauty. Now, on the eve of his departure, he had but one place he yearned to visit again. That place in the Himalayas, the massive cavern he had been led to, where he had seen the ruins of a civilization that went back God only knew how far.

But could I find it again if I had a thousand days' vacation?

Jim didn't think so. He had already tried several times and failed. Sometimes he imagined that the cavern did not want to be found, or that it didn't even exist; that he had only dreamed he had visited it. Yet he doubted the latter possibility. For he had returned from his subterranean journey with a souvenir.

Jim pulled the ring from his pocket. He seldom wore it but always kept it near. To the naked eye, it appeared quite ordinary, a plain silver band. Its only unusual feature was its perpetual shine. It fit comfortably on his middle finger, although he seldom wore it. He had a private joke with himself that he was waiting for the right person to give it to. He was the prince with the lost glass slipper searching for Cinderella.

On the surface, the ring was nothing to look at, but it proved extraordinary under closer examination. It was not silver or white gold, or any other metal known to modern man. It was too hard. He had once tried to scratch it with a diamond drill, and had ended up blunting the drill. Harsh acids failed to chemically bond with the metal, and he had tried them all. More impressive, a ruby laser at the University of Houston that had the power to start nuclear fusion had failed to melt it.

Then there was the ring's symmetry. He had scrutinized it under an electron microscope and had the results analyzed by a computer. He found it to be a perfect circle, a circle so perfect that it went beyond the instruments' ability to detect a flaw.

Jim had never allowed other scientists to examine it. He wondered if he was afraid they would discover it wasn't so mysterious, after all. Yet he doubted that that would happen. He was no fool when it came to operating the equipment he had used on the ring. And there was another reason: the thought of someone else touching the ring - besides his Cinderella - filled him with distaste.

No, its phenomenal hardness and symmetry were a fact. As was the place where he had found it, at least three miles under the highest mountain range in the world. Jim knew that the ring had not been fashioned by modern man. Sometimes he thought that it hadn't been made by man at all.

There was a knock at his door. Jim slipped the ring in his shirt pocket. 'Come in, Lauren,' he said.

'You must have X-ray eyes. How did you know it was me?'

Lauren closed the door and walked over and sat on his bed. She wore a blue blouse, and a white skirt that swept an inch below her knees. She looked tan and healthy, not like an astronaut who had been cooped up in isolation for ten days and fed a diet of raw fruit and vegetables. In preparation for their long slumber, they had been put on a cleansing fast. Lauren had lost five pounds. Jim had lost only one. He had stashed away six bags of chocolate chip cookies in his closet. When Lauren had weighed him that morning, she



had raised a suspicious eyebrow. He'd only smiled. He thought the doctors were wrong about sugar being unhealthy. It tasted too good.

'Only you or Gary would visit this late,' he said. 'And Gary never knocks.' Major Gary Wheeler was the pilot of the mission.

'He bolted in on me this morning while I was in the shower,' Lauren said. 'He had nothing on but a towel. I acted as if nothing was the matter. I think he was insulted. He mumbled something about being out of toothpaste and left.'

'Sounds like our Gary.' Jim knew Lauren had come for a reason. 'Have you heard any word on when the man is supposed to arrive?'

'The man' was the President of the United States.

Lauren brightened. 'Yeah, that's what I came to tell you. Dean called and said they would be here within the hour. I thought you might want to put on a suit.'

Jim nodded. Dean Ramsey was the head of NASA. 'I appreciate the warning. A shame most of my good clothes are in storage. But I'll see what I can dig up.' He paused. 'You look fantastic. You'll make up for the rest of us. I've always thought blue was your best color.'

'Thank you.' Lauren fingered the collar of her blouse. 'All my clothes are packed away, too. In fact, this is Lucy's top.' Lucy Delgado was their cook. She squeezed carrot juice, diced cucumbers, and raved about how fasting was a spiritual experience. Before Jim left tomorrow, he was going to stuff his empty cookie bags in Lucy's pillow case.

'I bet the president's going to wonder why he's sending such a beautiful woman to another planet,' Jim said. Lauren smiled. Jim continued, 'Is Gary presentable?'

Lauren lost her smile and groaned. 'No, he's despicable. He's in his cut-off jeans. He said he's kissed enough ass these last two years. I warned him that Dean didn't give a damn that he was a hero. But Gary just laughed. He's got a Budweiser T-shirt on.'

Jim chuckled. Gary had recently been promoted to Major. He and Lauren were the only civilians among the Nova's crew. Since Gary's climb in rank, he had become more contemptuous of authority than ever.

'He might get cold feet at the last second and change,' Jim said.

'I doubt it.'

'In that case we can only hope the president isn't a Coors man.'

Lauren laughed. 'Have you ever met the president, Jim?'

'Once, at the White House. I was invited there after I won the Nobel Prize.'

"What's he like?"

'Strange as it may sound, he's like you and me. And everyone else. He's not a bad fellow. He doesn't know anything about geology or archaeology, though. He wasn't even sure what I had won the prize for, but then, neither am I. But we did have a long talk about the Beatles.'

'The musical group?'

'Yes.' Jim reflected fondly. 'There never was another Beatles. But the sixties were great years for music. The Stones, the Doors, Simon and Garfunkel. Are you familiar with any of their music?'

'I've listened to the Beatles, but that's about it.'

'Friend has recordings of all of them in his data banks. I'll pick out some stuff for you. Wonderful music. The Doors would be great to listen to on Mars.'

Lauren had other things on her mind. 'Gary thinks the president's coming to tell us something top secret. Something about what really happened to the Russians.'

'And what do you think?' Jim asked.

'I think he's just trying to get on good terms with us. The next election is a few weeks after our return.'

Jim silently disagreed. Unknown to Lauren, Commander William Brent had called him that afternoon from the orbiting Nova. Bill's wife, Jessica, and Mark Kawati - the final two members of their crew - were helping their commander with final systems checks. The previous week, before leaving the Earth, all three had received a private visit from the president. On the video screen that afternoon, Jim had sensed concealment on Bill's part. Bill had been told something. They all had. The timing was logical, Jim thought. Once in space, the government could censor all interviews, or cancel them altogether. And Jim believed there was something secret that had yet to be revealed. Why else would the two most powerful nations in the world have suddenly bent their every resource to go to Mars? Why now?

'You're probably right,' Jim said.

Lauren was shrewd. 'But you don't agree with me?'

'I'm sorry. I'm as bad as everyone else. I love a mystery. I'm hoping the president spoke to the Martians this morning, and that they're expecting us.'

Lauren wrinkled her nose. 'You sound like Terry.'

'I take that as a compliment. I read his manuscript.'

Lauren leaned forward, expectant. 'What did you think?'

'It was one of the high points of my life.'

'No. Seriously?'

'I am being serious.' Lauren's fiancé was incredibly creative. It continued to amaze Jim that his work hadn't been discovered by the masses yet. He thought it was only a matter of time. He chuckled. 'I love the part at the beginning when Ricky is walking back and forth on the newspaper, reading it.'

'That was great, yeah. What did you think when he found out his girlfriend had stepped on his best friend Joe?'

'It broke my heart,' Jim said. 'The whole story was so sad, even though it was funny. The way Ricky kept talking about everything like an important person, when he was only a cockroach.' Jim shook his head. 'I think that book's going to explode.'

'If it doesn't die on the shelves in the first month.'

'Maybe when Earth is talking to us on Mars, you could read parts from it.'

Lauren's eyes glowed. 'I've been thinking of that. But wouldn't it piss everybody in Mission Control off?'

'Not at all. They'll laugh. They'll want to go out and buy the book. Do it.'

'Maybe I will.' She tapped Jim's knee. 'I'm going to have

to tell Terry what you said about the book. He'll be thrilled.'

'I didn't think my opinion meant that much to him.'

'Oh, he thinks you're a gem. Didn't you know that?'

'No,' Jim said.

'Don't give me that false modesty. Everybody thinks you're God. Doesn't it just drive you crazy?'

'I honestly never notice it.' He had always disliked talking about himself. 'Will Jennifer be here tomorrow for the launch?'

'Yes.'

'How is she?'

Lauren hesitated. 'Fine. She told me this morning on the phone that she wanted to see you before we left. You know, she talks about you often.'

'I think about her often,' Jim said. He had met Jennifer Wagner only a few times, but those were times he remembered well. She was a remarkable girl, with her deep silent pauses and her soulful blue eyes. She seemed to light up the room the moment she walked into it. She reminded him of a Cinderella...

How old is this place?

Jim remembered asking that question. Two miles under the Earth. He had never received an answer.

Lauren glanced at his desk. 'Did I disturb your work? Were you writing a letter or something?'

'Something,' he muttered, touching his blank will. All of a sudden he felt cold. On his desk stood a picture of the Nova's crew. Lauren's fiancé had taken it several weeks ago. Jennifer had been standing by Terry's side when he snapped the picture. She had been pointing at them, carrying on. 'Say "Martians,"' she had said.

'Jim?' Lauren said.

Jim picked up the picture. It was covered with a glass

plate, and for the briefest instant he saw a ghost image of Jennifer reflecting on the glass. As if she, too, had been captured in that instant.

Martians.

But the image was no longer laughing - only pointing.

'What's the matter, Jim?' Lauren asked.

'I was writing a letter to an old friend,' he said finally. He set down the picture. 'I'm glad you came, though. I'll get dressed in a few minutes.'

Lauren stood, kissed him on the forehead, and stepped to the door. 'I'll come get you when the president arrives, if you want to stay in your room till then.'

'That won't be necessary. I'll be down. My letter won't take long. I know what I want to say now.'

'I'll see ya.' She opened the door and left.

'Yes,' Jim said, alone again. For a moment he thought of going after her, and asking her to stay longer, if only for a few minutes. But he didn't wish to bother her. The chill that had struck him continued to linger. Try as he might, he could not find a source for it. He picked up the blank paper on his desk. There was one name he wished he could put on it. But if fate struck him down in the coming months, then Lauren would almost surely perish alongside him.

Jim took his pen and wrote:

To whom it may concern,

I, James Ranoth, hereby decree that in the event of my death, Jennifer Wagner, sister of Lauren Wagner, become the sole heir of all my possessions.

James Ranoth 8-15-2004 Jim put aside the paper and pulled out the silver ring. He held it under the light of the lamp, marveling once more at its wonderful shine. He remembered the first time he had put it on, how he had anticipated something strange and exciting happening. Of course, he had felt no different. One of these days he was going to grow up, he thought. He was a scientist. The ring was an enigma, to be sure, but it was not magic. Why did he keep looking for such things?

Yet it had that peculiar glow to it even when the light was faint...

Jim put the ring up to his eye and peered through the center of it at the picture of the crew that Terry had taken. But he saw nothing unusual, only the confident smiles of his friends and partners. He laughed at his own foolishness. Here he was, one of the world's most renowned scientists, and he was performing a child's experiment...

Except that the moment Jim took the ring away from his eye, the source of his disquieting chill crystallized in his mind. It appeared to emerge out of a gap in consciousness he wasn't even sure he had. It appeared amidst his other thoughts with a rough texture that felt oddly alien. Yet it carried a weight that told him it shouldn't be ignored. One thing for sure - the thought had entered his head the moment Lauren had entered the room; he just hadn't noticed right away. It was as if she had brought it with her.

None of you are coming home.



Jim slammed the photograph face down on his desk and quickly put the ring back in his pocket. He scowled at his own silliness. He took the will and folded it and placed it inside an envelope. Then he turned off the lamp and rested his head in his arms. His mind was confused and his heart was heavy, all for no reason. He loved Lauren, he loved them all. They were friends of his, bright and capable of meeting any challenge. They would go to Mars, he thought, and they would return, and everything would be fine.

Yet Jim was unable to convince himself. He was suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling that they were doomed.

## SEVEN

Major Gary Wheeler was reading his fan mail and giggling. Lauren eyed him with both distaste and affection. They were in the isolation complex's living room. Gary sat with his bare right foot rocking over the arm of his chair. He had been reading the same letter for ten minutes, and Lauren was wondering what the big deal was. They'd each received thousands of letters a week. She read only a fraction of them, but Gary went through every one carefully. Kids made up the bulk of her admirers, and Gary got them, too, along with lots of women. There were some risqué females out there in good old America. They often enclosed nude photos of themselves. Gary had a collection taped to his bedroom wall. To give him credit, though, he spent more time trying to answer the children. He had even hired a secretary out of his own pocket to deal with the swarms of letters. He sent the kids brochures telling them how they could grow up to be great like him.

Gary Wheeler was a child who had never grown up. In many ways he resembled Terry - he took nothing seriously. Yet he was far more innocent and wild than Terry, and undoubtedly had more fun with his life. Gary did not have Terry's cynical perception of the cruel things people were capable of doing, and so was spared much grief.

He was ridiculously handsome, in a boyish way, and was incredibly strong. Lauren had seen him bench-press three hundred pounds. He was six-two, one hundred and eighty pounds of muscle. He did not own a comb; his brown hair did not know what one was. He had nice eyes - fresh blue, with a little hazel mixed in to honor his Irish mother. He

walked as if he didn't have a care in the world, and sometimes he accidentally walked over other people, but he was quick to apologize - if he was in the mood. He was thirty-two, and he had come up fast, and that was not easy to do without ticking people off.

He had joined the Air Force before coming to NASA, and he loved to fly jets more than anything in the world. As long as he still had his wings, the world could turn the way it wanted below him and he didn't complain - too much.

Many considered Gary the most crucial member of the Nova's crew. Gary was responsible for flying the Hawk, the Martian lander. He would have the assistance of Commander William Brent, and the guidance of Friend, their computer, but ultimately it was Gary who would decide where and when - and even if - they would land. Lauren trusted him. She also liked him, quite a lot in fact.

'I'm telling you, we don't have time for this,' she said. 'Dean told me he would be here within the hour, and that was forty minutes ago. You promised me you would change.' Actually, Gary had promised nothing of the sort, but she hoped he would fall for her lie. Unfortunately, he had not heard her. He continued to giggle. 'Was she good?' she asked, raising her voice.

Gary glanced up. 'Did you say something, Lori?'

'The president's arriving in a few minutes.'

Gary waved his arm in dismissal. 'Their plane hasn't even arrived. Dean's just being an ass. They'd only left D.C. when he called.'

Lauren wasn't sure how Gary knew this, but decided he probably had better information than she. She relaxed and pointed at his letter. 'Someone I know?' she asked.

Gary's eyes sparkled. 'Curious, Doc?'

She hesitated. 'I'm not sure.'

'She has blond hair.'

'I'm not interested,' she said quickly.

'I've been saving this one for when we were on Mars.'

'Is it dirty? I don't want to hear about it.'

'I'm going to tell you,' Gary said.

'OK.'

Gary laughed. He leaned back in his chair and scratched his crotch. 'This happened three months ago. I had to fly out to Rockwell in California to talk to their engineers about the Hawk's boosters. It was a useless meeting. Anyway, I finished early and wasn't due back in Houston for a couple of days. This was a Friday. I called an old buddy of mine, Fred. You met Fred. He's that bald guy who got a hair transplant and then started to have migraine headaches. We went to a movie in west L.A. and then to a coffee shop. We were sitting there, eating pie, when this girl walked up to us. She was real shy and cute. She asked if I was Gary Wheeler, the astronaut. They always say it like that. I said, yeah, then she asked if I was going to be going to Mars soon, and we got to talking. I invited her to sit down. I liked her right from the beginning. So did Fred. Her name was Kathy. She was a physical therapist, and on weekends she worked as a volunteer at a children's spinal injury hospital. She told me about the place and asked if I could swing by the next day and meet the children and talk to them about our mission. You know how I like kids.'

'Yeah,' Lauren said. 'Just out of puberty.'

'Hey, my intentions were noble, at least at this point. The next morning Kathy picked me up at my hotel and took

me to the hospital. The kids were excited. It was touching-there wasn't a one of them that could walk normally. Not that they were all down in the dumps. They seemed real together. They loved me. I gave a speech on what it was like to fly the shuttle, and to be weightless. There were some pretty sharp minds there - they asked good questions. I guess not being able to play and stuff, they read a lot. I was lucky I had a box of literature on the Nova from Rockwell. I passed it out, and stayed for a couple of hours and signed autographs.'

'Get to the juicy stuff, would ya?' Lauren complained.

'When we were leaving the hospital, Kathy asked if I wanted to eat. We went to a restaurant and then saw a movie. It got late. We had a few beers at a bar. I must have been feeling loose. You know how I never drink.'

'Excuses, excuses.'

'I started to notice what a sweet girl she was. We talked for hours. She works a forty-hour week in an orthopedic surgeon's office. But she's so devoted to those kids. I really began to dig her. I thought she liked me, too. I know she did. She told me she thought I was special.' Gary paused. 'She asked if I'd like to come to her house for coffee.'

'For coffee. Right.'

'Yeah, with the beer in me, I didn't care if she served it with a little cream on the side. She lived with her parents, but on the way to her house, she told me they were out of town. That was all right with me.'

'How old was this girl?' Lauren asked.

'Twenty-five. Why?'

'I was just wondering. Go on.'

'Soon as we entered her house, she put the coffee on. Then she started to check every room in the house. It was weird. I assumed she was looking for burglars. She even went out into the garage. I started to look around myself. It

seemed the thing to do. A few minutes passed. I began to wonder where she had gotten to. When suddenly she snuck up on me from behind and wrapped her arms around my waist. What the hell, I thought. I was surprised, though. I hope I haven't given you the wrong impression of her, Lori. Kathy struck me as very shy.'

'Yeah. Sure.'

'We started kissing. She leads me upstairs to her bedroom. There she lets it all hang out. Jesus, if she didn't have these tits under her sweater. She was an animal. She tore off my pants before I could undo my belt. I was having trouble keeping it together, and we had only just begun.'

'This is gross,' Lauren said.

'Yeah? I'm glad I got your interest. Now all this time Kathy didn't say a word. In fact, as soon as we'd gone into the bedroom, I heard someone knocking at the front door. I asked if she wanted to see who it was, but she didn't answer. She just kept doing what she was doing, and I forgot about the knocking. So there I was, naked in her bedroom, about to make the supreme public relations sacrifice for NASA, when suddenly...'

'Don't tell me!' Lauren cried. 'Kathy came running in.'

Gary looked startled. Then he chuckled. 'You're right. It was Kathy, all right. I was in bed with her twin sister, Lorraine. It seems Lorraine had pulled the same trick before. That's why Kathy was searching the house - to make sure Lorraine was out. Unfortunately, when she looked in the garage, Lorraine locked her in it. That was the knocking I heard. But Kathy got back in somehow. She went berserk. She tackled Lorraine to the floor. They fought like two cats. Kathy called her every name in the book. But Lorraine was enjoying herself. She laughed her head off. She had a high, shrill voice - it's hard to describe. It was no wonder she didn't talk to me. It was total

madness. They were both bleeding from scratches. I worried someone would get seriously hurt. I jumped in and broke them apart, which was not easy. I eventually got Kathy downstairs, and had her sit quietly on the couch. But I was still naked. I had to go back upstairs to get my clothes. Lorraine was lying naked on the floor, grinning like a stoned duck. She wanted to know if I'd had fun. She had a real weird voice. She probably gargled with limestone every morning. Sure, I said, I had a great time. No hard feelings. As I was leaving, she told me I had a nice rocket, and that I should look her up when I got back from Venus.'

'Venus,' Lauren muttered.

'Kathy was crying when I came back downstairs. She was a mess. I got dressed and apologized like a madman. But she didn't blame me at all. She understood it wasn't my fault. You see, Lori, they look exactly alike. Lorraine makes a point of it. Anyway, eventually Kathy calmed down, and she was able to drive me back to my hotel. She was still sad, though. She thought I wouldn't want to see her again after the way she had attacked Lorraine. I told her that was nonsense. But I did explain that I wouldn't be able to come back to the west coast until after the mission. She got all upset. She thought I

was just making up excuses. She wouldn't even give me her phone number. She said I'd never call. I tried to convince her I was being sincere, but she drove away.'

'Did you call her?' Lauren asked.

'Yeah. I got her home number from her office the next morning. But Lorraine answered the phone.'

'What did she say?' Lauren asked.

'I don't know. I got Lorraine. I hung up. I've called a dozen times since - Kathy can't take calls at work - but Lorraine always answers the phone. She must carry it around in her pants. She talks like a witch from the Middle

Ages. I always hang up. Lorraine's unnatural. She's got great tits, though.'

'So is that letter from Kathy?'

'No! It's from Lorraine.' Gary picked up the letter once more. 'She sent it a month ago. It must have got lost in the shuffle. It's ten pages long. She starts off saying what a fine rocket I have, and how naughty Kathy was to barge in on us. She's pretty funny. I'll read you a few lines.'

'No. I want to hear about Kathy.'

'Lorraine says her sister's broken-hearted over me. Lorraine also says she told Kathy that I called, but that Kathy didn't believe her.'

'Why don't you try calling her again?'

Gary nodded. 'I will. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow? Gary, we're going to Mars tomorrow.'

'Exactly. Think how Kathy will feel when the pilot of man's greatest adventure calls a few minutes before blastoff. She'll know I care.'

'What if she's not home?' Lauren asked.

'She will be. She'll be home in front of her TV watching the shuttle take off. I'll call just when I'm getting into my suit, when all the cameras are on me. She'll see me pick up the phone on TV and then hear her own phone ring.'

'I don't know, Gary. We'll be busy then.' Lauren stopped. She had to ask herself if she wanted Gary talking to Kathy. Not that she was jealous. 'Oh, hell, what do I care? You probably made that whole story up.'

Gary was insulted. 'You want to read Lorraine's letter?'

'No, I don't have time. I still don't believe you.'

Gary jumped up and shoved a handful of pages covered with what could have been chicken-scratch in her face. 'I won't even speak to the president if you don't read this. I'll be in the bathroom the whole time.'



'You wouldn't dare,' Lauren said.

'Wouldn't I?'

She smiled. 'I'm calling your bluff, Major. Lowly, Major.'

He snorted. 'You can be such a bitch.'

'What does it matter if I don't believe you? Why do you tell me these stories, anyway? I don't want to hear your trash.'

'You love it, you liar,' Gary said.

'You're always trying to prove your masculinity to me. I don't give a damn how many girls you've screwed.'

'You just wish you were one of them,' Gary said. 'You were panting when I told you about Lorraine ripping off my pants.'

She acted bored. 'I'm a doctor. I've seen plenty of men with their pants off. I've seen you without your pants on.' She shrugged. 'Not that there was much to look at.'

'Are you saying I have a small penis?'

'No.'

'You better not be.'

'Gary, I am a famous person. The whole world respects me. People in all five continents pray for my well-being each night before they go to sleep. I am also a liberated woman. I would never say your penis is small.'

'It's not, you know.'

'But I would have to say - as a medical professional - that I've seen cadavers that could probably get harder.'

'You're saying I'm impotent?'

'I'm just making an observation.'

Suddenly, for no apparent reason - she was, after all, insulting him - he grabbed her and kissed her hard on the lips. Then he pulled back, grinning. 'You love me,' he said. 'Admit it.'

'Bastard!' She tried to slap him but missed. 'Don't you ever do that again!'

He grabbed and kissed her the same way. 'What, Doc?'

Lauren lunged at him angrily. But Gary had excellent reflexes. He stepped aside and she hit the floor. He kicked her in the butt while she was down.

'Damn,' she swore.

'You women doctors,' he said. 'I never met a hornier lot.' Then he made a mistake. As he moved to poke her in the side, he stepped behind her leg and she kicked his calf out from under him. He crashed to the floor, and she was up in an instant. She grabbed a cushion from her chair and smacked him in the face as he crawled onto his knees. He went down again, and she jumped onto his chest and pinned his arms with her knees. He tried to bite her thigh and she shouted something barbaric and whacked him with her pillow a second time. He began to laugh his fool face off. He was playing with her. He calmly took hold of her wrists, and squeezed tight. It was like being caught in two vises.

'So, Lori, you like to be on top,' he said.

Lauren fought to free her hands. 'Let me go!'

'No.'

'I'm going to tell the press you're gay,' she said.

'I already told them you're a slut.'

'That's bullshit.'

'I told Walkers at CBS that I had you a dozen times in free fall. From behind.'

'You're lying.'

'Then why are you upset?' Gary asked.

'Because you won't let me go!'

'You love me. Gimme a kiss.'

'I'm going to squash your rocket!'

Gary groaned. 'You already are. Jesus.' He tossed her aside as if she were a plastic mannequin. She rolled on the floor and sat up quickly, panting. She realized she was soaked with sweat, and that her hair was a mess. She felt exasperated, and great. She loved to wrestle. She smiled.

'Look at us,' she said. 'And the president's going to be here any second.'

'Any second? He's here already.'

'Huh?'

'You probably didn't notice, but the video phone's been beeping for the last minute.'

Gary was right. Lauren scampered to the phone and punched the accept button. Lucy Delgado, their cook, appeared on the screen.

'Lauren! I've been trying to reach you. The president's here. He's waiting for you three.'

'How long since he arrived?'

'Only a few minutes. But Dean expected you to be in the conference room.'

The conference room was where they met with the press - on separate sides of thick tempered glass. The room had been secured for the president's visit. 'Tell them we'll be there in a minute,' Lauren said.

Lucy looked worried. 'Lauren, it's no business of mine, but I think you should comb your hair. You look like you've just been in a brawl.'

'Why, Lucy, that's a remarkably perceptive observation. Give Dean my message.' Lauren cut the connection and glared at Gary. 'Change your clothes. Now.'

Gary rolled over on the floor and yawned. 'You remind me of Lorraine,' he said.

## EIGHT

The president of the United States talked about the weather. It was nicer here in Florida than D.C., he said. The intervening glass was flawlessly clear, and his voice sounded natural enough through the overhead speakers. So far Lauren had been impressed by the man, but her fascination was more intellectual than emotional. When she reminded

herself how powerful he was, then she felt awe. Otherwise, he was, as Jim said, like everyone else.

Next to the president sat Dean Ramsey. He looked tired, not that he ever looked well. He had dark circles under his eyes that made him resemble a homeless addict just lifted from the streets and fitted into fine clothes. Yet now even his suit was wrinkled. He was a notorious workaholic, and married to a woman who supposedly bitched in her sleep. He never went home. At his feet were a black attaché case and a bulky black suitcase. Lauren found herself waiting for them to be opened.

Finally the president cleared his throat. Lauren leaned forward expectantly. He was going to tell them something.

'Contrary to what you may believe from TV,' the president said, 'I'm not a man of many words.' He stopped and straightened his tie. 'Have any of you any idea why this meeting was called?'

Lauren shook his head. Jim remained silent. Gary alone spoke. Thankfully, after a word from Jim - just a word, Lauren thought - Gary had changed into decent clothes. Gary said, 'Are you here to tell us what became of the Russians?'

The president smiled faintly. 'Do you think I know?'

Gary shrugged. 'You're the president.'

'I spoke with their president last May,' the president said. 'He had nothing new to tell me. I believe he was being sincere.'

'Did you question him specifically on the loss of their orbiting cosmonaut?' Jim asked.  
'Supposedly they were in communication with Carl Bensk for days after their lander fell silent.'

'He had nothing to say, except that they just lost communications with Bensk, for no reason.'

'Was Bensk in good condition when this happened?' Jim asked.

'I would assume,' the president said.

'Why?' Jim asked.

'Why not?'

'Because he never came back,' Jim said.

The president frowned. 'Your questions are appreciated, Professor Ranoth. What we have to show you tonight may throw some light upon their fate, or at least upon the fate of those who died on Mars. One point about my talk with their president, something that testifies to his sincerity - we have been given permission, and every assistance, to dock with their orbiting Gorbachev. Obviously, they are as anxious as we to discover what became of their men.'

'Please tell us what you do know, sir,' Gary said.

The president signaled to Dean, who opened the black attaché case and removed a sealed envelope. He passed the envelope to Gary through a pressurized drop on the far wall.

Accepting the envelope was a break in quarantine, Lauren thought, unless, of course, the contents had been sterilized, which she figured must be the case. Gary tore open the envelope. Inside were two colored slides. Following instructions from Dean, Gary placed the slides in a projector that they often used to display diagrams for the press.

'Lights,' the president said. The room fell dark. On the screen appeared a photograph of the Martian landscape: salmon-pink slopes and orange sky, plus plenty of rocks -the planet's trademark. From the terrain, Lauren recognized it as a picture relayed to Earth by the Martian Rover. The Rover had landed on Mars in 1996. It was an enormous mobile vehicle with two inflatable wheels twenty feet high. It had an instrument package - containing TV cameras and experiment platform - suspended safely between its wheels. On the way to Mars, each wheel - made of sixteen separate pie sectors of kickass plastic - had been deflated. But once on Mars the Rover was able to drive itself over the plains by sequentially inflating and deflating the sectors of its wheels. The Rover was able to cope with rocks up to three feet high and had radar to warn it of approaching holes. It had worked beautifully for two days, driving about the Utopia Planitia region, taking excellent pictures, and digging up and testing numerous soil samples.

Then it had stopped transmitting. Its builders theorized it had accidentally driven off the side of a cliff.

Lauren studied the picture and noticed nothing remarkable.

'This photograph was returned to us in the summer of 'ninety-six,' the president said in the dark. 'This was one of the last pictures the Rover sent us. This picture, and others

like it, are the reason you are going to Mars.' He paused to let his words sink in. 'Do you notice anything peculiar?'

A lengthy silence ensued. Lauren looked harder but wasn't sure what she was looking for. Gary stirred restlessly beside her. Finally Jim spoke.



'That series of impressions that cuts across the foreground,' Jim said. 'Is that what you're referring to, Mr President?'

'Yes, yes,' the president said, sounding strangely relieved. 'Very good, Professor. Few people notice the impressions at first. You usually have to stare at them for a while before you appreciate their significance.'

Jim stood and moved closer to the screen. Lauren's understanding finally began to blossom, and she trembled inside. She told herself it couldn't be true, but the more she looked, the clearer it was that the president was right. The impressions weren't just stupid holes.

They were footprints.

Yes? No?

At least they could have been footprints.

'Jesus,' Gary whispered beside her.

'Exactly how I reacted, Major,' the president said, 'the first time I saw them. Please switch to the next slide.'

Gary clicked the projector. What followed was the identical photograph, but magnified three times.

'How big are those?' Lauren heard herself ask.

'Two feet long, one foot across,' the president said. 'Each impression fans out at the top, where the ... toes would be.'

'But the foot that made them need not have been as large as the tracks,' Lauren said quickly.

'True, Dr Wagner. When we walk across sand, we leave tracks bigger than our feet. However, here the surface dust is thin. Experts who have studied these photos feel that the feet in question are much larger than our own.'

'Or the claws in question,' Gary muttered.

'Perhaps, Major,' the president said. 'Have you anything to say, Professor?'

Jim continued to stand near the screen and study the picture. 'This blow-up is not as impressive as the original,' he said.

'No doubt some resolution was lost in the magnification,' the president said.

'Maybe,' Jim said. He faced the president. 'I would like to see more of these slides.'

'I didn't bring any more. I felt these two were enough.'

Jim looked disappointed. Lauren did not understand his reaction. He should have been excited. Her own heart was pounding. Aliens. Martians. Monsters. All her knowledge of

Mars had just flown out the window. She suspected it was going to take a while to assimilate what they were hearing and seeing.

'Would it be possible to study other photos before I leave?' Jim asked.

'You're leaving in the morning,' the president said.

Dean spoke hastily. 'Couldn't that be arranged, Mr President? Professor Ranoth is an expert in his own right in many fields.'

'Security in this matter is very strict,' the president said. 'We have no way of knowing how the public would react if this discovery leaked out. The lights, please, Major Wheeler.' The projection of Mars faded. The president added without enthusiasm, 'But I'll see what I can do.'

Jim crossed to the projector and pointed to the slides. 'May I take these with me tomorrow?'

'No,' the president said.

'The Nova is more secure than any place on Earth,' Jim said.

'The security in this matter has already been set,' the president, said. He was far from at ease, apparently not only because of security. Yet Jim continued to hammer at him, which in turn was uncharacteristic.

'You say these pictures are the main reason we're going to Mars tomorrow,' Jim said. 'And they were taken in 'ninety-six. Yet project Nova was not started until 'ninety-seven.'

The president spoke crisply. 'The significance of these pictures was not appreciated at first.'

'What does that mean?' Jim asked.

'No one noticed the footprints,' the president replied stiffly. 'It's incredible in light of their unnaturalness. Plus financing had to be arranged, and that took some doing.' He attempted to smile. 'Few Americans are worried about Martians.'

Jim smiled himself, briefly. 'Are you worried, Mr President?'

'I'm not sure I understand your question?'

'Do you consider this discovery a matter of national security?'

'In a sense. A matter of future national security.'

'Did the Russians get a look at these pictures?' Jim asked.

'No,' the president said.

'Yet they started their own project Gorbachev at approximately the same time,' Jim said.

The president was uncomfortable. 'They had sent remote probes to Mars. In 'ninety-three, for example.'

'But they did not start a crash program to reach Mars until 'ninety-five,' Jim said. 'Why do you think they delayed?'

'I have no idea,' the president said.

'When you spoke to the Soviet president, did you discuss these pictures?' Jim asked.

'I believe I have already answered that question,' the president said. 'No, I did not.'

'But you do believe their remote probes discovered something that inspired project Gorbachev?' Jim asked.

'Yes,' the president said, growing impatient. 'What is your point, Professor?'

Jim, who had been pacing slowly, stopped and leaned against the back of his chair. 'I have traveled to all parts of this globe. It's funny, but when you live in the city, you think the whole world's crowded. It's only when you travel in the country, or sail across the ocean, that you realize the world is mostly deserted. I find it amazing that our probes, and the Russian probes, should each come across evidence of life. No, not just life, but extremely evolved life - an animal of some sort. Don't you agree, Mr President?'

'The evidence speaks for itself,' the president said.

Lauren interrupted. 'Do the experts who have studied these pictures feel the creatures who made the footprints are intelligent?'

'They consider it highly unlikely,' the president said. 'You all know the reasons why. There is absolutely no sign of civilized life on Mars.'

'There's the canals,' Gary said with a laugh. They all laughed, except Jim.

'But the Martian environment is hostile,' Jim said. 'Biologists agree evolved life could not have developed there in the last few million years.'

The president spread his hands. 'I'm not a scientist. But I have learned over the years that the universe is a strange place that doesn't always follow scientific laws.'

'That is true,' Jim agreed, thoughtfully. He fingered his shirt pocket.

'Perhaps this species evolved when the conditions on Mars were much different,' Lauren suggested. 'Then adapted.'

Jim nodded. 'It's possible.' He let go of his shirt. 'We know our own climate was greatly different in the distant past.'

'You can see why you were only informed of these pictures now,' the president said. 'Earlier, and you would have been too preoccupied with constructing theories to concentrate on your program. But I hope you are satisfied, Professor, with what you have seen tonight. There is another issue that we need to discuss before I return to Washington. For the first time in history, we are dealing with an alien life form. The question arises: do we have the right to protect ourselves? What would you say, Major Wheeler?'

Gary answered immediately. 'If they are not intelligent creatures, sir, I would say yes. If they are intelligent, I would have to think about it.'

The president nodded. 'Professor Ranoth?'

Jim was displeased. 'Protection at what expense? If there are such creatures, they may not be intelligent now, but who can say about the future? Or even the past. It is their planet.'

Lauren respected Jim's answer, but did not like it. She had her own reasons, the most significant of which was that she didn't want to be eaten alive.

'What do you say, Dr Wagner?' the president asked.

'If they are only animals,' she said, 'and they attacked us first, I would feel justified in protecting myself.'

The president nodded. 'Well, I got two out three votes. My decision matches the majority. You are to protect yourselves. I will not send you to Mars to be killed.'

Jim sat down. 'We would be the invaders,' he said.

'Oh, Jim,' Gary said. 'Don't be so idealistic. If they're only animals and can't think, what difference does it make if we have to shoot a few?'

Jim's face flushed, and Lauren thought he might be angry. When he spoke next, however, he sounded only hurt. 'Maybe they can do other things besides think.'

'I am giving you an order,' the president said firmly. 'All of you. Defend yourselves at all costs. If they are intelligent, they will not attack you.'

'If they came here,' Jim asked, 'what would we do to them?'

"This debate can go on all night,' the president said. 'I don't want to have to keep repeating myself.'

Jim leaned back in his chair. He looked weary. 'Are you so sure, Mr President, that we can protect ourselves?'

For the first time since showing his slides, the president seemed to stand on firm ground. 'Yes,' he said. He motioned to Dean who carried the bulky suitcase to the pressurized drop. Gary accepted it on their side, compromising their quarantine for a second time. The threat of the footprints suddenly hit closer to home for Lauren. Inside the suitcase was a laser rifle. Lauren had seen pictures of experimental models, but none as compact as this one. Gary whistled with excitement and swung the weapon to his shoulder. Mostly silver in color, the rifle was stubby, with a short barrel that culminated in a translucent ring. Nevertheless, it looked heavy.

First Martians and now ray guns.

'Careful, Major,' the president said. 'I've been told it isn't charged, but let's play it safe.'

Gary's eyes glowed. 'What can it do?'

The president treated them to a movie this time instead of slides. The clip came out of Dean's attaché case. It showed a white-coated technician pointing the laser at a four-foot-thick brick wall and simply blowing it away. They learned the rifle weighed thirty pounds, and had to be recharged after every three shots. Its battery was a high-temperature superconductor - especially designed to provide instant energy to power the laser. The Hawk carried four such weapons. That was twelve rounds, Lauren thought. She was already counting her ammunition. She wondered if the Martians moved in packs.



The range of the weapon was over a quarter of a mile. Nothing could stand in its path, the president said, and live.

'Very impressive,' Jim muttered, when the film was finished.

'I know you are unhappy, Professor,' the president said, his voice gentle now, 'with all this talk of weapons. We only want you to be able to protect yourselves.' He stood to leave. 'Let us pray this is all a foolish caution. Now, if there are no more questions...'

'Is the Rover still operating?' Jim asked, standing, too.

'No,' the president said. 'How could it be?'

'Was it suddenly destroyed?' Jim asked.

'We don't know,' the president said.

'I assumed when you showed us these slides that you believed whatever had made the footprints had tampered with the Rover,' Jim said.

'I never said that,' the president replied. He added, 'Your first landing will be near the Rover. You'll see for yourself what became of it.'

Jim pointed once more to the slides in the projector. 'May I examine these for a few more minutes?'

'Certainly,' the president said. 'For as long as you like -tonight. Anything else I can do for you, Professor, before I say goodbye?'

Jim smiled, his usual warmth surfacing. 'Tell me what became of Carl Benski. But I guess I'll have to wait to know that. Forgive my many questions, Mr President. It's a tiresome habit of mine.'

Jim was one of the quietest people Lauren knew.

'I appreciate your alertness,' the president said pleasantly, perhaps because he was leaving. They all stood to say goodbye, hearing the usual. Farewell, God bless you, best wishes, and don't get killed. Then the president was gone, with Dean trailing behind him.

Lauren took a breath. 'Whew. That was heavy.'

'Martians!' Gary exclaimed. 'What did I tell you?' He patted the laser rifle. 'Would you look at this thing, Doc'

'Just remember, I'm not that brick wall,' Lauren said. She touched the barrel, and felt the comforting hardness of its cold metal.

'May I turn out the lights?' Jim asked. He stood beside the projector. 'I want to see these footprints before the sand covers them over.'

'Sure,' Gary said. He set down the laser. 'Boy, I have to hand it to you, Jim. You were really going at him. I think he spilled a few things he hadn't intended.'

Jim shook his head and flipped off the lights. The Martian landscape reappeared on the screen. 'The only thing he spilled was his confusion. He couldn't have answered any questions if he wanted to.'

The silence they had experienced at their first glimpse returned, as the red world held their attention. Lauren wondered how she had missed the footprints to begin with. They appeared obvious now, yet still mysterious, arousing a powerful curiosity in her, seemingly calling to her. Come, Lori, follow my trail. I will lead you to places you never dreamed of. It was difficult to turn away.

'The more you look at them,' Gary said, 'it's weird - the more you see.'

'Yeah,' Lauren whispered.

i

'The more you look,' Jim agreed. 'The president must have looked at them for a long time. I'm sure they all did.'

Lauren tore her eyes away and turned to Jim. She studied his ascetic profile in the crimson light. When she had gone to fetch him after wrestling with Gary, she had found him sitting with his head down on his desk, in the dark. When she had turned on the light, she had found his eyes red.

'What are you thinking, Jim?' she asked now. 'Why were you asking those questions?'

He appeared not to hear her at first, and the mannerism was very much like Jennifer's. He stared at the alien terrain as if he were actually there, planting his own feet in each of the footprints, following the beast. At last, however, he sighed and looked away. 'I was only thinking about the Russians, Lauren. They probably brought lasers with them, too.'

'Oh,' Lauren said. Then the footprints called to her once more, and she looked their way. They were definitely larger than a human's, and the way they spread at the end, it was hard to think of toes, and not claws. A dark voice crossed her mind, the voice of a nightmare she still hadn't forgotten.

Come, Lori. Come.

## NINE

The space shuttle waited for his woman, three miles away on the launch pad, bathed in the soft glow of the pre-dawn sky and the harsh beams of a dozen searchlights. It pointed at the sky like a multiheaded spear, and Terry hated the sight of it. Somebody of importance had decided that he and Jennifer were only to be given a few minutes to say goodbye to Lauren. Since four in the morning he had stood with Jennifer near the entrance to the isolation complex. It was now five-thirty, half an hour before Lauren would leave the complex and board the shuttle, but two and a half hours before the shuttle would actually take off. The excitement was killing him, and making him want to kill the people who wouldn't let him inside.

Terry did not feel well. He had an incredible case of heartburn, which was odd because he hadn't eaten in the last twenty-four hours. The ulcer he had considered getting for several years was making a strong case for itself this morning. He hugged Jennifer against his chest. They were surrounded by people, reporters like himself, and important people like his fiancée. Cameras stared at Jennifer and him to record how brave loved ones could be. It was all bullshit, he felt like crying. Officially, he was on assignment for his paper, but he wasn't taking any notes. A tall fence separated them from the general public. On the other side, mixed in with the moms and pops and kiddies from across the country, was a group of hecklers. They were members of a cult Terry was vaguely familiar with - The Paul. Paul himself wasn't around at the moment, but his disciples were doing their best. They chanted slogans and carried banners questioning the integrity of the mission. Apparently they believed that the world was about to come to an end; that NASA was purposely inviting the wrath of the cosmos down upon mankind with their expedition to Mars. One banner read: only servants of the beast do the beasts bidding. Terry was uncertain of The Paul's origin, but their theology seemed to revolve around a morbid interpretation of Revelations. Had he felt better, they probably would have angered him. As it was, they just made him feel more miserable.

Jennifer pointed at the demonstrators. 'Are they bad people, Terry?' she asked.

Her voice was grave, as was the expression on her face. Those were her first words in a while. Terry hadn't felt much like conversation, either. 'No,' he said. 'They're just people who have been misled by a man more powerful than themselves.'

'They're saying bad things about what Lauren's doing.'

'Because they're afraid. They don't know that it's good for man to explore new planets. They're afraid of things changing.'

'Would they be afraid if Lauren was going somewhere else beside Mars?' Jennifer asked.

'Yes. It wouldn't matter to them.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' Terry said.

'Positive?'

'Yes.'

Jennifer nodded, but appeared unconvinced. The previous night had been dreadful for her. The rooms Terry had booked had been unavailable when they arrived in Florida. Cape Canaveral was jammed. Only by begging and bribing a motel manager was he able

to get a seedy room in a place thirty miles away. They had been there a week now. He had slept on the floor while Jennifer tossed and turned on the bed. Her nightmares had returned in force. Neither of them had told Lauren, although Terry suspected she knew. Sleep was a time of battle for Jennifer. He had never seen anything like it. She jerked uncontrollably, mumbled words and phrases in nonsense language, and even had something akin to asthma attacks. Yet it was seldom she actually woke up, though morning always found her drained. When he asked her what she dreamed about, she just shook her head and said she couldn't remember. For some reason, he didn't believe her.

Just prior to meeting Terry, Lauren had taken Jennifer to a psychiatrist in Houston to try to discover the source of her nightmares. It was the doctor's belief that Jennifer suffered from guilt over her parents' dying so close to the time of her birth, which Terry felt was a stab in the dark. Jennifer had hardly reached the age when she could talk when her mom and her dad had had their car accident. The psychiatrist had tried hypnotizing Jennifer, and had been unsuccessful, which had surprised the doctor; children were notoriously easy to hypnotize. In fact, Lauren, who had witnessed the procedure, had said the psychiatrist ended up accidentally hypnotizing himself.

'He sat right in front of Jenny, using a pendulum and talking real slow and soft, counting down from a hundred to one, making a variety of relaxing suggestions. He did this for about twenty minutes, trying to put her under, but nothing happened. Jennifer just sat there with her eyes closed and listened. Finally he asked her to open her eyes. I thought he was giving up. It was then he suddenly jerked in his seat, as if he had been shocked with electricity. His head fell on his chest and he passed out. For a moment I thought he'd had a heart attack and died. I had a hard time waking him. I think Jennifer scared him. He didn't want to see us again.'

Terry thought of last night and a shiver ran up his spine. For hours he had lain listening to Jennifer convulse in her sleep, when suddenly she had grown still, and her breathing had softened. With relief, he began to doze - he couldn't remember when he had felt so exhausted. But when he was on the verge of slipping off, he heard Jennifer start to weep, the sound so full of anguish he could hardly bear it. He got up and sat beside her on the bed. At first he assumed she must be awake, but when he called her name she didn't answer. For a long time he stayed near her, smoothing her long hair, wiping off the tears that rolled over her cheeks. Eventually she began to quiet, and he moved to lie down again, but she grabbed his arm. She was still unconscious, but she gripped him with the strength of a full-grown man. Then she spoke softly, in a voice totally unlike her own. It had such depth and resonance to it, it didn't even sound human.

'They will come,' she said. 'They are waiting. For so long, they have waited.'

Then she released him, and he forgot any idea of waking her. He had hurried back to his spot on the floor and had buried his head under the blanket.

A couple of hours later they had dressed and come to the isolation complex, where they had been told to wait in the dark. Terry had not asked Jennifer about who was coming. He was sure she wouldn't remember the nightmare, and he didn't really want to hear about it, anyway. He was feeling kind of superstitious these days. He supposed having a fiancée going to Mars could do that to a fellow.

A man the size of a gorilla approached. He was a security officer. There were a lot of them about. 'Are you Terry Hayes and Jennifer Wagner?' he asked.

'Yeah,' Terry said. 'Can we go in now?'

'Let me see your identification.'

Terry presented the two badges NASA had issued for visiting Lauren. The man inspected them closely.

'Please, sir?' Jennifer whispered.

The man looked down at her for the longest time. Then he thrust back their I.D.'s. 'Come this way,' he said.

Lauren was beginning to despair of ever seeing Jennifer and Terry. The government was taking no chances with the big secret. As if she really was going to tell her fiancé and sister about the footprints.

"Hey, Terry, Jenny, guess what the president told us last night?"

Those people - whoever they were - were paranoid. Gary had tried to call Kathy in California, but had found their outside lines blocked. They weren't on TV as Gary had envisioned. They were alone in the conference room, wearing white flight suits. The hall on the other side of the glass was empty, sealed off and guarded by men who looked to be CIA agents - the president's own boys. Gary was disgusted. He had explained to Jim that he had to call a girl in California, and Jim had gone to his room and returned with a lunch pail full of tools. Now he was taking the video phone apart, with Gary leaning over his shoulder. There was nothing else to do. The time had been earmarked for visiting with friends and relatives. Along with Jennifer and Terry, Gary's parents were stranded outside. But Jim, it seemed, had no one waiting to say goodbye to him.

Jim had the video phone's guts exposed. Apparently he knew a way to circumvent the main switchboard. There wasn't much that Jim didn't know.

T-minus two hours and twenty-nine minutes,' the voice through the overhead speakers said.

'Half an hour,' Gary said, holding back a circuit board for Jim.

'Probably less,' Jim muttered. He took his soldering gun and picked up a microchip.

Lauren sighed. 'Why don't they let them in?'



Jim glanced up from his operation. 'You'll see them, Lauren, don't worry. You're not going anywhere until you do. I'm not.'

'Damn right,' Gary agreed. 'We'll go on strike.'

Lauren nodded without much hope. 'Thanks.'

Two minutes later Jim sat back from the disemboweled phone. 'I can trip it now,' he said to Gary.

'And then what?' Gary asked, his face feverish.

'You did say you knew her number?' Jim asked.

Gary tapped his head. 'Got it right here.'

'Good. Essentially what we have done is made this phone into a public one. You can dial her directly.'

'What if she's not home?' Gary asked.

'Seems I heard someone else ask that before,' Lauren muttered.

'I can't work miracles, Gary,' Jim said.

Gary smiled. 'You'll never convince me of that. What do I do?'

Jim picked up a pocket computer - which he had attached to the back of the phone - and two exposed wires. He touched the wires together and there was a faint spark. 'Call her now,' he said. 'Quickly, before they stop us.'

Gary was pushing the buttons. 'Can they do that?'

'Yes,' Jim said. 'I'm hitting the switchboard operator with a barrage of incoming signals. At first she'll simply think her board has broken. That's our smokescreen. But it won't last. I wager security has a man at the switchboard. He'll get suspicious, sooner or later - probably sooner -and cut our power. Then someone will come in and yell at us.'

'It's ringing!' Gary cried.

'Good,' Jim said.

Lauren stood and moved next to the phone. Jim winked at her. Gary could have been a five-year-old opening Christmas presents. The screen blinked into life. A young blond woman appeared. She was pretty, Lauren thought, but looked older than the twenty-five years of age Gary had described. The sun wrinkles around her brown eyes were largely to blame.

'Kathy!' Gary exclaimed.

'Gary!'

Gary slumped in his chair as if he had been shot. 'Lorraine, is Kathy there? I've got to talk to Kathy. I'm going to Mars in a few minutes.'

Oh, is that why you called, Lauren thought.

We know, silly,' Lorraine said. 'They canceled my favorite late-night movie to show ten million different angles of your steaming rocket. The newscasters are soooo boring. What are you doing, honey? How come we don't get to see you on TV?'

'Damn it, Lorraine,' Gary said. 'I can get cut off any second. Is Kathy there?'

Lorraine didn't blink. 'Yes. She's in the other room watching TV. Why don't I tell her you're calling.'

Gary nodded vigorously. 'Do that.'

'But why don't you talk to me first,' Lorraine said. 'Did you get my letter?'

'Yes! I got your letter. But Lorraine, please - I don't have a few minutes.'

'I spent four nights and two days writing it. That Negro boy I told you about, the one at the park who had that operation on his testicles, helped me write it.'

'Damn you, get Kathy!' Gary shouted.

Lorraine smiled. 'You sound tense. I wish you were here. I could get rid of that tension for you.'

Gary lowered his voice and started to beg. 'Please, Lorraine? I really am about to be cut off. This call is against the rules.'

Lorraine twisted her mouth into a cruel line of delight. 'You're so neat, Gary. You risked your job to call us.'

Gary pleaded. 'Look, if you get Kathy now, I promise I'll call you personally from Mars.'

Lorraine pouted. 'But that's so far away. I wouldn't be able to hear you very well, not like I can now. There's something I have to tell you about the young Negro boy and his testicles. They cut him a way where he can't...'

'Shut the fuck up!' Gary screamed. Poor Gary, Lauren thought, but she was beginning to enjoy herself.

Jim eased Gary aside and said politely into the phone, 'Hi, Lorraine, my name's Jim. I'm a good friend of Gary's. He's right when he says our connection could be interrupted. You can see he honestly wants to speak with your sister. Please tell her Gary is calling, as a favor to me. I would appreciate it.'

Lorraine didn't hesitate. 'All right.' She disappeared from the screen. Gary looked at Jim as if he were God.

'T-minus two hours and twenty five minutes,' the speakers said.

Lauren groaned.

'I know how you feel, Doc,' Gary said, his eyes glued to the screen. Suddenly he sat upright in his chair. 'Kathy!'

'Gary!'

She didn't have her sister's wrinkles, Lauren noted, and consequently looked younger. Also, Kathy's eyes were green, as opposed to Lorraine's brown. They were not identical twins, as Gary imagined. Lauren also noted a twinge of jealousy on her own part, but dismissed it. At the moment, she had too many other things to worry about.

'You called,' Kathy was saying, her voice sweet with emotion. 'I'm so glad you called. You're leaving now, aren't you?'

'Yes,' Gary's forehead was damp. 'I'm going to Mars. I've called you a few times.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Didn't Lorraine tell you?'

Kathy looked distressed. 'She did tell me, but I didn't believe her. I wanted to. Lorraine's sick, you know. She's going to this new doctor my parents found.' She bit her lower lip. 'I'm going to miss you, Gary.'

'It's OK,' he said gently. 'I'll visit you as soon as I get home. I'll visit your kids at the hospital. I'll have a lot of neat stories for them. I'm sure something exciting will happen on Mars.'

Gary stopped, and so did the clear transmission. Static cracked the screen, and perhaps it was because of his comment about neat stories. Kathy's face distorted into an unrecognizable blur. Security was on to them. Jim tried manipulating the circuitry but to no avail. The phone went dead a moment later.

'At least I got to see her,' Gary said, staring at the blank screen. Jim patted him on the back.

'She seems like a nice girl,' Jim said.

'I liked her,' Lauren added.

The exterior hall doors burst open. Two hot-faced CIA men entered the room beyond the glass. 'Major Wheeler,'

one said. 'Were you using an outside line?'

'I called a friend,' Gary said, bored. 'Is there a regulation against that?'

'Who did you call?' the man insisted.

'I forget,' Gary said.

'He called his grandmother,' Lauren said. 'When are you guys going to let my sister and Mr Hayes in?'

'Soon,' the man said, eyeing Gary without affection.

'Make it very soon,' Jim said. 'And I want to speak with Dean Ramsey. Immediately.'

'That's not possible, Professor,' the man said.

'Jenny!' Lauren cried. From behind a stocky security officer, Jennifer appeared. She ran to the glass partition. Terry followed slowly. There were weary bags under his eyes and Jennifer looked like she had been crying. Lauren felt her heart breaking. How could she do this to those she loved? She put her hand to the partition, and they did likewise. They pretended to touch. They babbled about nothing; how quickly the two years would pass; how bad the weather on Mars would be; how badly Terry would write without her around. Jennifer nodded, wiping at her eyes. They talked about how happy they would all be one day soon, the biggest lie of them all. Then the speakers sounded again.

'T-minus two hours and ten minutes.'

End of conversation.

A colonel appeared and told them to put on their helmets.

'A minute,' Gary growled at him. 'Where are my parents?'

'I don't know,' the colonel said. He checked his watch. 'But I don't think you have time to worry about them right now.'

Jim's questions must have annoyed the president, Lauren

thought. None of them trust us, and we're supposed to be heroes.

'Yes. sir,' Gary said. He picked up his helmet and put it on. The fight had gone out of him. Lauren knew he must be starting to think about the blast off.

'I guess this is it,' Lauren said to her family, the voice unsteady.

Terry rested his hands on Jennifer's shoulders. 'I wish we had more time,' he said. 'Can't you leave tomorrow?'

Lauren smiled, close to tears. But crying was against the rules. Astronauts never cried in front of others. They were all so fucking brave. 'I don't think so,' she said softly. 'Jenny?'

Jennifer nodded. 'I'll think about you every day, Lauren.'

'I will think about nothing else but you.' Lauren pressed her open palm flat on the glass, and Jennifer matched the spread of her fingers with her own little hand. 'Princess.'

Jennifer sniffed. 'I love you.'

Lauren stood, trembling slightly. 'I love both of you.'

Terry leaned his forehead on the glass, pain in his face. 'Why couldn't you just get a normal job?'



Lauren swallowed. 'Because I'm not normal.'

Terry grinned wistfully. 'I know.'

Lauren fastened her helmet over her head. Ordinarily astronauts did not put on their helmets until they were in the shuttle but they couldn't have any nasty germs following them to Mars. Now another glass wall separated her from the world. There was a hiss of air as the helmet seal locked. A green light flashed at her wrist. Cold oxygen filled her lungs. Her faceplate fogged slightly but still she did not cry.

'T-minus two hours and seven minutes.'

Time to go, the clock said. You have places to be and

monsters to meet. The door that had remained locked since they had entered the isolation complex now opened. Lauren stepped through it into the hallway. Terry and Jennifer pressed close to her side. This time the hallway was going to take her to another world. Technically, because of the quarantine, they weren't supposed to touch anyone. On the other hand, their suits should protect them from any germ.

'Jenny,' Jim called, as he came up behind them, his voice muffled inside his helmet. He knelt and took her sister's hand as Lauren watched. Jennifer pressed her ear against Jim's faceplate. Jim was trying to tell her something. People swarmed around them from all directions. In the confusion, Lauren could not hear what Jim was saying. A flicker of surprise crossed Jennifer's face. She was listening intently to Jim, and when he was done, she nodded vigorously. Jim opened the gloved fist of his suit and handed something to her. It was a silver ring. Jennifer took the band and held it up to her wide blue eyes. Then she slipped the ring over her thumb.

'I'll wear it, Professor,' she promised. 'But I'll give it back to you when you come home.'

Jim stood up straight and touched the top of her head. 'This present is yours to keep, Cinderella.'

They started down the long hallway. Doors opened before them and flashbulbs exploded. A mindless stream of faces swam by Lauren, blurred as if seen underwater, and she was reminded of the nightmare she'd had in Wyoming. The world was as it should be, but something was terribly wrong. Too many people wanted to brush her gloved hands, she wasn't allowed to hold on to Terry and Jennifer. Even those in the crowd she recognized looked like strangers. Many of them were crying the tears she herself was holding in. It did not seem right.

The corridor expanded. A senator who supported the space program waved. Another senator who had lobbied against Project Nova tried to kiss her through her faceplate. Soon she was outside. It was early, but the bright sun had just come up. Cape Canaveral was jammed with spectators. In the distance she saw the shuttle. Ten feet away stood a small open truck, waiting for them. Lauren swallowed on a hard lump full of tender loss. This was it, she kept thinking. Two years, two fucking years. She turned and hugged Jennifer and Terry. Take care of yourself, Terry. Finish your next book. Don't step on any cockroaches. You take care of yourself, too, Jenny. Walk in the woods for me. Read happy books. Be happy. They are only dreams, little sister, they don't mean anything. Of course Daniel thinks you're prettier than me. Didn't I tell you, Princess? You're the most wonderful person in the world.

They said goodbye. Bye, bye. A last hug, a last wave. Then Lauren turned and climbed into the cart. Gary squeezed her knee. Jim put his arm around her. The shuttle grew large in front of them, until soon it was bigger than anything else in the whole world. Lauren did not look back. Not even when the countdown reached zero, and the gentle blue sky of Earth was transformed into the hard black of space. A strange voice was talking inside her head, trying to reassure her.

You are not evil, emissary, for performing your duty.

Lauren thought the voice was a liar.

## TEN

They coasted into the starry night. The Red Sea, burning with the reflected rays of an evening sun, slipped over the rim of the world two hundred miles beneath them. The shuttle engines gave a final spurt and then cut off. The silence that followed was so deep it seemed to ring. But perhaps it was Lauren's ears that were ringing. As always, the first few minutes after lift-off had been loud. This was Lauren's third trip into space, but she still did not see how the pilot - in this case, Gary - heard anything from Mission Control over the headsets. All she got was noise, but she remembered the first time she had lifted off from Earth! It had been the most exhilarating noise she ever heard. It was a pity that this departure had been tainted by grief.

Lauren looked out of the window and let the beauty of the scene take the place of her painful thoughts. The entire Middle East was free of clouds and she could see the pyramids and the camels and their drivers' headbands - and it was easy to let her imagination flow, now that her pencils and notebook were floating at eye level. She began to feel somewhat better. Gary was singing a song. He was a rocket man...

Somewhere over an empty black Pacific the voice of Mission Control was replaced by another voice. 'Columbia. Columbia. This is Station One. Over?'

'What's Bill want?' Gary asked the Milky Way. The voice on the radio belonged to their commander, Colonel William Brent. In this day and age of exhaustive psychological evaluations and sophisticated compatibility ratings, it amused Lauren that on the most expensive undertaking in human history, NASA had placed a commander and a pilot together who frankly didn't like each other.

'This is Columbia,' Gary said, opening communications.

'Major Wheeler,' the voice replied. 'This is Colonel Brent. Congratulations on your successful lift-off. We have you .531 kilometers Y vector down from our projections. Over?'

'Affirmative,' Gary said. 'We will adjust in approximately three minutes. Columbia out.'  
Gary flipped a switch on his control board and scowled.

'You were a bit short with him,' Lauren said.

'I know where we are,' Gary said. 'He doesn't have to tell me.'

'What does it matter?' she said. 'The computers fly this damn thing, anyway.'

'Listen, Doc, these computers only do what I tell them to do.'

'Gary,' Jim interrupted.

'What?' Gary growled.

'Maybe you'll get to talk to your parents once we're underway,' Jim said.

'Why do you say that?' Gary asked. 'Am I acting grouchy? I'm not grouchy.'

'It is my unbiased medical opinion that you are showing symptoms of being a pain in the ass,' Lauren said.

'I know about your unbiased opinions,' Gary said. He spoke to Jim. 'You really think they'll let me talk to my mom and dad?'

'I do,' Jim said. 'They won't be so paranoid when they know they can cut you off when they want. Bill will be speaking with the president. Have him explain the situation for you.'

Gary nodded. 'I'll do that.'

Dawn came again, half an hour later, pouring through the open windows and turning everything to white. Lauren wished for a pair of sunglasses. Her eyes had only begun to adjust when she spotted Space Station One, its two-hundred-yard-diameter wheel revolving like a giant polished ornament. Floating nearby was the Nova, looking oddly insect-like in the harsh shadows of the vacuum. The three of them were not the shuttle's only cargo; the cargo bay behind them was loaded with supplies for the space station.

There was a jolt as the shuttle's engine reactivated. Now came the fine adjustments. To climb to the higher orbit of the station, they had paradoxically to lose speed. Lauren was not surprised to see that Guy had disengaged the automatic pilot. He took any chance to fly that he could get. Soon they were descending upon the station from above, the California coast the background canvas for their celestial maneuvers. The view was staggering, but was slowly eclipsed as Gary throttled them into the station's axis, which rotated opposite the station proper and thus appeared stationary. Instinctively Lauren gripped her seat.

'Your rotational vector is .073 cycles high, Columbia,' Colonel Brent said over the radio.

'Weez already know that, Billy,' Gary said. He slowly rotated a flashing violet knob counterclockwise. There was a low roar as a thruster fired. Then came a final hard bump and a gentle hiss as they locked onto the station's airlock. The first segment of their voyage was over.

'Good job,' Jim said, slapping Gary on the back.

'You sure know how to impress a girl,' Lauren agreed. She carefully unfastened her straps. Now weightlessness became a factor. Lauren remembered her first experiences free of gravity. Half of all astronauts felt ill for a day or two while their bodies adjusted to life without up and down, and she had fallen into the unfortunate half. On her maiden voyage into space she had vomited in the pilot's face, an act she was still living down at Mission Control. But after her initial sickness, she had felt fine. In fact, she had come to love slithering around the cabin of the shuttle - and the corridors of Space Station One - like a seal on wheels.

Lauren followed Gary and Jim as they floated out of the shuttle, through an airlock, and into a heavily padded circular green room. Slowly the walls about them began to rotate, regaining the spin they normally shared with the remainder of the station. Faint, invisible strands of gravity reached up from the floor as Lauren planted her feet, swaying with her companions like flowers dancing in a gentle breeze. The grief of her parting with Terry and Jennifer lessened further. If she but shoved off the floor she could fly like a bird. The knowledge filled her with a sense of euphoria. Gary and Jim shared her feelings. Suddenly, for no reason, they started to giggle. They were still giggling when Jessica Brent climbed out of the ceiling.

'Jessie!' Lauren cried.

'Why if it isn't the queen of soul herself,' Gary said.

Lieutenant Jessica Brent was thirty-two years old, a tall thin dark-skinned woman with thick lips, a short afro, and dizzy expressions. The latter were a cause of some humor at Mission Control, but there was absolutely no truth to the rumor that the reason she had been chosen for the mission was her husband's influence. Jessica was one of NASA's finest biochemists, and although her friend Gary insisted she had never graduated from high school, she had in fact

published almost as many scientific papers in prestigious journals as Jim had. She had uncanny instincts when it came to research. At the age of twenty-six, while still completing her graduate studies, she had traced the HS-9 virus - the latest and vilest form of herpes (it affected the whole body with cold sores that lasted as long as warts and looked like yellow-headed pimples) - back to the smallpox vaccine. The discovery had consequently led to the development of a new smallpox vaccine free of side effects, and a

national reputation for Jessica. Yet she had no ego about her astounding work. Always upbeat, Jessica was one of Lauren's favorite people. Soon she would be the only other woman around for two hundred million miles.

'I missed you all,' Jessica said, gliding down the curved walls and into their greeting arms.

'Are all systems still green?' Gary asked.

'We're still going to Mars, that's for sure,' Jessica said. 'But we'll be leaving on the next orbit instead of the one after that. Don't take off your helmets.'

'The next orbit,' Lauren gasped. 'Why?'

Jessica shrugged. 'Don't ask me. I'm just a lowly lieutenant.'

'But we've only just begun to blow the nitrogen out of our systems,' Lauren said.

'They're moving us up because of our last instructions,' Jim said. 'They don't want us shooting our mouths off in front of the space station's personnel.'

'But Jessie's been here a week,' Gary said.

'I didn't tell anybody about the footprints,' Jessica said.

'What do you think of them?' Lauren asked.

Jessica rolled her eyes. 'I'll believe the Martians when I see them. They just looked like holes in the ground to me. I don't see what the president and his people are all shook about.'

'Shh,' Jim cautioned. 'It's me in particular they are worried about. The president probably felt I asked too many questions.'

'That's ridiculous,' Gary said.

'I thought the same thing myself,' Lauren said, agreeing with Jim.

'What about Lisa?' Gary asked. 'I wanted to talk to her. Does this mean we have to go straight over the Nova, Jessie?'

'We're not to leave here until Bill arrives,' Jessica said. 'But yes, then we're to go right over. None of you is allowed out of the axis.'

'Who's Lisa?' Lauren asked.

'I have equipment stowed here that I was supposed to collect,' Jim said.

'It's been taken care of,' Jessica said.

'Where's Mark?' Gary asked.



'Aboard the Nova,' Jessica said.

'Who's Lisa?' Lauren asked again.

Gary studied the passageway from which Jessica had emerged. 'She's a friend of the male species,' he said. 'Jessie, are there guards on the other side of that door?'

'Gary!' Jessie said, shocked.

'I thought you were in love with Kathy,' Lauren said.

'So I have a big heart,' Gary said. He turned to Jim. 'What do you think, buddy?'

'The worst they can do is have you shot,' Jim said.

Gary laughed and asked Jessica, 'Tell me, any guards?'

Jessica sneered. 'I'm not saying nothing.'

Gary poked her in the stomach. 'You just said it, mama.' He launched himself towards the exit. 'Catch you kids in a few minutes. Don't worry about my nitrogen, Doc. Lisa knows how to pop bubbles in the blood.'

'I do, do I?' a young woman with a ten-year-old's voice

asked. Lisa poked out of the chute and floated into Gary's arms. She looked like Kathy from California, only she had long red hair and longer legs. Not that Lauren cared. However, she did think it was disgusting of Lisa to embrace a grown man on the ceiling.

'How did you get in here?' Gary asked. 'I was told we were off limits.'

'You are,' Lisa said, her face flushed red. 'But the moment Colonel Brent dismissed the guards, he was called back to the control room to speak with Houston. He...'

Lisa didn't finish. Suddenly her high-cheeked face went bone white. Colonel William Brent climbed into the space-station axis. He stood on the ceiling like an ominous shadow, regarding Gary and Lisa with his usual stoic expression. He was a big man, powerfully built like Gary, with a roughly hewn handsomeness that gave the entirely correct impression of inner strength. Bill was the boss, no questions asked, and an expert in propulsion systems. He was also one of a handful of people in the world who understood the inner workings of Friend. He was a stern, seemingly emotionless man, and seldom spoke. However, when he did talk, Lauren listened.

'Why, Bill,' Gary said. 'Fancy meeting you here.'

Bill ignored the remark and addressed trembling Lisa. 'You are to return to your post immediately, young lady.'

'Yes, sir,' she whispered. She started to say something to Gary, but thought better of it and turned and fled.

'Catch you in a couple of years,' Gary called after her.

'Hopefully she'll be legal by then,' Lauren muttered.

Bill gathered them into a group in the center of the axis. 'I am pleased to see you all here and safe. As Jessie has told you, the Nova is departing approximately ninety minutes early, on the next orbit. We will taxi over and begin final systems checks.'

'AH my equipment has been transferred?' Jim asked. 'That is correct, Professor. Lauren?' 'What about my review of the hibernaculums?' 'You will do that after we break away,' Bill said. 'But what if there is something wrong?' Lauren asked. 'There will be nothing wrong. Gary?' 'You won't report Lisa, will you?' Gary asked. 'No,' Bill said. 'Not if you taxi us over now, Major.' That was agreeable to Gary. They re-entered the airlock and climbed aboard a low-powered rocket that resembled a golf cart that had been turbocharged by a mad scientist. Lauren studied the Nova through the ferry's windows as they drifted across the two hundred yards of space that separated the ship from the station. At the front was attached the Hawk, the spider-legged vehicle that would land them on Mars. In the Nova's center was the main body of the ship, where they would eat, sleep, and perform the various duties not specifically related to the exploration of Mars's surface. A multi-spoked wheel set on the most sophisticated ball bearings ever devised by man, the center section revolved around the spine of the ship every five seconds, creating a gravity at the rim of the wheel equal to one-third that of Earth's, which just happened to match Mars's gravity. They would reach the red planet with their bodies fully adjusted.

At the rear of the Nova were the fuel tanks and propulsion systems, comprising the bulk of the ship's weight. The powers that would hurtle them towards Mars were simple chemical reactions, the burning of liquid hydrogen in combination with liquid oxygen. Already additional fuel tankers were speeding towards Mars. When Project Nova had begun, many felt an efficient atomic engine could be developed. But the weight of the necessary lead shielding, and the uncertainty of working with new technology, had led NASA to choose the more basic chemical system. Their choices were more understandable in light of what the president had shown the night before. NASA had been in too much of a hurry to come up with something better.

Another outstanding feature of the Nova was a large antenna bowl located between the revolving wheel and the rocket engines. It was, of course, responsible for maintaining communications with Earth. It had no backup, but its builders swore the odds against its failure were astronomical - not the most comforting of expressions, Lauren thought, considering the astronomical distances they were about to travel.

In the Nova's airlock, fresh air gushed from the floor in welcome. Immediately Lauren noticed pain in her left knee and bent and massaged the joint. It was nothing but a slight muscle pull caused by the high G's of the shuttle blastoff, and she was not worried.

'I feel the same in my chest,' Jim said, noticing her discomfort.

'In your chest?' Lauren snapped her head up. 'Are you having any difficulty breathing?'

Jim smiled. 'Not at all. Just some tightness. I always have that after leaving Earth. It will go away soon.'

Lauren nodded. 'It should.' Because Jim was fifty-two, she always kept a special eye on him. 'Tell me if it doesn't, though. Be sure to.'

'Of course,' he said.

They left the airlock and floated down a narrow tunnel that was the equivalent of the space station's axis. Soon they reached the outer hub of the ship, moving once again within the domain of gravity. As they stepped into the control room, Mark Kawati, the final member of their crew, glanced up from a computer screen and smiled.

Mark Kawati was of Japanese descent, as short as Lauren's five-three, with a small round face and extremely crooked teeth. He was pleasant and smiled often, but he was unusually shy and kept mostly to himself. Since he would be left alone aboard the Nova while they explored Mars, his solitary nature was an asset. The loneliest man in the solar system, the papers were already calling him, comparing him to Charles Lindbergh. His field was engineering. Word had it that he possessed a photographic memory, and knew every pipe and pump in the Nova's propulsion system by heart. He was obviously very good with his hands. Once Lauren had broken the clasp on a necklace Terry had given her for Christmas. Mark had repaired it in minutes. Naturally she'd assumed he'd had experience with jewelry, but such was not the case. He possessed almost instinctual

mastery in his specialty, and that specialty was to fix things that were broken, whatever they might be. His nickname was 'The Mechanic'

'Mark,' Gary said, shaking his hand. 'There is a gremlin attached to the aft fuel tank. Could you go outside and shake him off, please?'

'Hello, Gary,' Mark said, never sure where Gary was coming from. 'Is there really a problem?'

'No,' Lauren said, removing her helmet. 'That was cruel of them to leave you here alone.' She gave Mark a quick kiss on the lips. Mark blushed. Gary threw a fit.

'On the lips!' Gary said. 'And she calls herself a doctor. How disgusting.'

'Shut up, Major Wheeler,' Colonel Brent said flatly, bent over the manual helm controls.

Lauren released Mark with an affectionate squeeze and moved to the central computer console, where Jim was already sitting. Friend surrounded them - indeed, the entire ship could be said to be his body - but she always felt

most at ease looking at the main screen when she addressed the master computer. It was here alone, on a light blue background, that his printed words appeared in brackets. When Friend spoke, she almost heard those brackets.

Friend was part of the latest generation of intelligent machines - optical computers. He didn't contain a single circuit board or silicon chip. He was, rather, made up of a complex network of lasers, lenses, and mirrors, and was capable of making computations one thousand times faster than conventional machines. It had been a cousin of Friend that had mapped the complex human genetic structure. If he couldn't think, he faked it so well it was impossible to tell the difference.

'Hello, Friend,' she said. 'How are you feeling today?'

[Very well, Lauren, thank you. I trust your flight up from Earth was pleasant?]

Friend's voice was masculine, but high and sweet, reminding her of a member of the Vienna Boys' Choir she had once met at a big social gathering in Houston. Although the voice wasn't the least bit mechanical, Friend still sounded artificial because of his flawless pronunciation and utter lack of emotion.

'The trip was fine,' she said. 'Gary was in top form.'

[Gary is an excellent pilot.]

'Hear, hear,' Gary said. 'At least someone appreciates my greatness. Thank you, Friend.'

[You're very welcome, Gary.]

Through the Nova's windows, Earth was shrinking, a giant colored ball falling slowly into an endless black well. Six hours had elapsed since Nova's rockets had fired, adding twelve thousand miles an hour to their speed, and throwing them well beyond Earth's maximum orbital velocity. Because of the tremendous energy needed, the Nova would not cut a straight line towards Mars. Rather, it would bend outward in a gentle curve from Earth's orbit and intersect the slower fourth planet approximately three months later.

Gary never did get to talk to his parents, nor did Lauren get to speak with Jennifer and Terry again. Bill tried his best to obtain permission, and even went so far as to tell the president he was being illogical, but the powers that be had already made up their minds.

Gary was upset, but Lauren accepted the situation philosophically. The goodbye at Cape Canaveral had been bad enough. Why go through it again?

Lauren kept herself busy. The hibernaculums were her particular concern, and she spent hours checking the metabolic sensors and priming the equipment with the life-supporting solutions that would be fed into their bloodstreams during the long sleep.

After the six of them had completed their respective duties, they gathered in the control room, and had the inevitable discussion on the Martians and their footprints. Gary, Jessica, and Lauren did most of the talking. Mark was content to nod his head and agree with whoever was talking. Bill sat silent and aloof, as if the discussion were beneath his dignity. Jim, too, for the most part, remained silent. When he did speak, it was only to ask how they had felt while looking at the Rover's pictures. The nature of the creature who had made the footprints did not seem to concern Jim.

Gary put forth the interesting theory that the footprints were created by beings not native to Mars. He fetched a half-dozen science fiction novels from his private locker as authoritative references. His notion was plausible since, as Jim had said to the president, conditions on Mars appeared too hostile for evolved life to develop. Jessica suggested that the footprints were made by the descendants of human beings who had traveled to Mars before recorded history began. Jessica was a great one for esoteric ideas. She even swore she had seen a UFO once. Lauren argued for a creature native to Mars, perhaps a being similar to the arthropod phylum on Earth, since the arthropods had adapted most successfully to the greatest variety of conditions back home. Everyone shuddered at her suggestion. No one wanted to meet a giant insect.

Finally, it was time for them to retire to their hibernaculums, and Lauren really got to work. Each person had numerous wires attached to their bodies to monitor their brain-wave activity, heart activity, and so on. Each had to be hooked up to two tubes that fitted into a previously implanted arm shunt similar to those that kidney patients used for dialysis. Human kidneys functioned poorly during hibernation; consequently their blood had to be circulated and filtered by mechanical means. During their filtration, the chemical that would reduce their metabolic rate - the Antabolene - was periodically introduced. Antabolene had been discovered in experiments with African lungfish. During the long dry summers in Africa, these fish burrowed into mud beds and their metabolism fell to a fraction of the normal level. What nature had given to the lungfish, science had been able to duplicate and improve upon. When Project Nova was in the formative stages, NASA had realized a tremendous amount of supplies could be saved if

the crew was unconscious for the bulk of the journey. Yet the Antabolene did not induce the popularly depicted suspended animation. The drug merely allowed them to copy the bears, and sleep peacefully during the dark winter months ahead. The Russians had not had this blessing, and perhaps the mystery behind their disappearance was nothing more than insanity caused by too many games of chess. Terry had once written an article that said as much.

A couple of hours after putting the crew to bed, Lauren's duties were almost complete. Monitoring her companions' vital signs on the six separate screens above her own hibernaculum, she saw that all was going well. Nearby, Jessica and Bill were already asleep, and in the adjacent room, Gary, Mark, and Jim were about to join them. Lauren left her monitors and went to bid those three a final goodnight. But she was too late for Mark; he did not respond when she called his name.

'Sweet dreams,' she said, crossing to Gary. He smiled vaguely through the clear lid of his hibernaculum. She lifted the glass aside. 'I came to kiss you goodnight.'

Gary mumbled something she could not understand. Lauren leaned over and put her ear to his lips. 'Tell me,' she said.

'I wish I had you to keep me warm,' he whispered. Then his eyes fell shut. Lauren kissed him on the forehead and then lightly on the lips. She brushed his hair aside and stood staring down at him for a long time.

'I wish so, too,' she said softly, before closing the lid. He hadn't heard her, and it was probably just as well.

Jim was still alert. Her surprise must have showed as she stepped up to his hibernaculum, for he said, 'Insomnia. An old friend. I always take a while to doze off.'

Lauren checked his pulse. 'You're on your way, though.'



Jim nodded. 'Did you say goodnight to Gary?'

Lauren felt a pang of guilt. 'Yes.'

'That's good,' Jim said. He seemed preoccupied. Lauren thought of his puzzling attitude toward the Rover's pictures. If she didn't ask him now, she might forget when they woke up.

'Are you thinking about the footprints?' she asked.

'The footprints.' He frowned. 'I guess we all are.'

'But they bother you for different reasons than the rest of us. Tell me, Jim, what is it?'

He smiled his kind smile. Except for the faint colored glows of buttons and dials, and the soft hum of equipment, the Nova was dark and quiet. For the first time, Lauren felt the full impact of having left Earth. Yet Jim's nearness was comforting.

'When I was a child,' he said, 'someone donated a telescope to the orphanage where I lived. I was interested in astronomy already, and the instrument was like a gift from heaven. Almost every night I would go out and look at the sky for hours, especially when Mars was up. For some reason, it always held a special fascination for me. Of course, the telescope could show scarcely any detail on the planet. But I had heard of the famous Martian canals, and for a long time I tried to see them. I must have been about ten at the time. There was no halfway knowledgeable adult around to tell me there were no canals. So I kept searching, night after night, and eventually I saw them. Quite clearly, if I remember right. I was so happy. I could hardly sleep for thinking about them. I would stay awake and imagine how great the Martian engineers must have been to construct canals that circled their entire planet. But not long after that I read a library book that said the canals were an illusion. The book said that the famous astronomers, Lowell and

Schiaparelli, had only imagined that they had seen them. I was disappointed, but in time I accepted the reality of the situation, and stopped seeing them myself. But even as a child I often wondered how such a great astronomer as Lowell, with a respectable telescope, could have made such a stupendous error. The theory that they were generated by his technique of occasionally placing a diaphragm over the lens of his telescope never made sense to me. In this technique - it's called "stopping down" - two bright patches sometimes bleed a dark line in between them. But you see, Lowell not only saw the canals, but drew intricate maps of them. Stopping down would have produced two or three illusionary images at best. No, Lowell saw the canals he drew on his maps, there is no doubt in my mind. Once he said that the more he looked at Mars, the clearer they became to him. And he wasn't alone. Several others confirmed his sightings.' Jim paused. 'Yet there are no canals.'

'I don't understand,' Lauren said, understanding more than she wanted to admit. At first she hadn't seen any footprints, and then - once they had been pointed out to her - they had been perfectly clear. And so fascinating.

'I don't either,' Jim said, beginning to fade under the effects of the Antabolene. 'It worries me.'

'But how could this common illusion affect us?'

Jim closed his eyes. 'Lowell saw canals from millions of miles away. We'll be walking in that place.'

'But?'

Too late. Jim was asleep. The discussion would have to continue in a few months. Lauren felt an eerie chill in her stomach as she looked down at him. Jim reminded her of her father. They both seemed so wise. They even looked similar: sun-beaten skin, thinning gray hair, lines of hardships and triumphs etched in their faces. If Jim could not take care of them, no one could.

Lauren returned to her monitors. Everyone was doing nicely. Now it was her turn. She stripped and took a hot shower, afterwards putting on a pair of white shorts and an oversized Houston Oilers T-shirt. Then she climbed into her hibernaculum and repeated the machine-flesh fusion that she had accomplished on the others. She felt no fear of the process. A year ago she had undergone a practice

hibernation in Houston that had lasted seven days. She had awoken feeling wonderful; full of energy. And in the event of an emergency, Friend would wake her.

Lauren fitted two clear plastic tubes into the artery shunt on her left arm and turned on the circulator. Quickly the Antabolene began to flood her system, bringing with it a sudden wave of drowsiness. She opened a final line to Houston and they wished her sweet dreams. For a long time she rested, following the heartbeats of her friends as they traced rhythmic green lines across the screens above her head. She felt herself drifting away, but also felt a sudden need to say a last goodbye to Earth. She hauled herself into an upright position where she could peer out a portal beside her hibernaculum. Unfortunately the revolution of the Nova had momentarily placed the ship's spine between her and Earth. She did not have the strength to wait for the Nova to wing her around to the other side. She fell back exhausted, experiencing a vague foreboding that she would never see her world again.

'Friend?' she whispered.

[Yes, Lauren?]

'What are the odds that I will return from Mars?'

[91.762 percent, Lauren.]

She yawned. 'Those are pretty good odds.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

'But why aren't they a hundred percent?'

[There are many unknown factors, Lauren. For example, the Hawk's main thruster efficiency has not been critically rated under ideal...]

Lauren heard only a part of the reasons why. She sank swiftly, as soft hands slipped gentle reins of thoughtlessness over her mind, easing her down into a gray field of oblivion. This was how death would be, she thought, a peaceful void. But before that time came she must ask Jim once more

about why people saw canals on Mars, and why he gave Jennifer a shiny silver ring and told her to wear it. Before that final end came she had to see, at least one last time, her Princess.

## BOOKTWO

Chaneen

## ELEVEN

Excerpts from Jennifer Wagner's Story

In the Garden, on the edge of the vast ocean, and the borders of the tall mountains, lived the people of Sastra, the first and greatest of human beings. Because they were from the beginning, they were untarnished, beautiful and wise, of fair form and kind desire. Their king was Rankar, mightiest of the Sastra, and their queen, Chaneen, loveliest of the

offspring of the gods. They were man and wife, the parents of the children and the guardians of mankind. Their powers were a mystery. Often Rankar could be found communing with the gods, seeking the knowledge of the immortals. But although Chaneen shared Rankar's abilities to contact the higher beings, it was in her heart to care for the Garden, to bring life and joy from the ground, and to make blessed the dwelling of her people. Seldom did she call upon the gods, being content to walk under the sun of her own world.

For countless cycles the Garden enjoyed peace, forgetting even the bitter war with the Asurians long ago. But it came to pass one day that an ambassador from Asure arrived on the outskirts of the mountains that sheltered the Garden from the desert. He begged permission to enter the Garden and exchange counsel with King Rankar. The news was brought to Rankar and Chaneen while they rested in their palace, near the pool of sacred waters where the stars shone bright at night. Janier, Chaneen's sister, and much loved among the Sastra, brought the tidings along with her husband, Tier, who had won great renown during the

ancient war with the Asurians. Bowing low before their King and Queen, they advised that the request of the Asurian ambassador be denied. Rankar considered the news and the advice with a long silence. Finally he spoke.

'What does the ambassador give for a name, and how many of his people accompany him?'

Janier answered, 'There are but two who stand by his side, my Lord. 'She lowered her voice. 'It is Kratine himself who seeks entrance.'

At the mention of Kratine, a shadow fell over Chaneen's heart. Kratine was Asure, the land and its people, the King who had decreed that his race should inhabit the Garden. It was Kratine who had been responsible for the death of so many of her children. Only by Rankar's invocation of the Fire Messenger had the Sastra been able to defeat Kratine's army cycles ago. Scars of those battles, memories Chaneen wished to forget, returned vividly in her thoughts.

'Why would you have me turn Kratine away at our doorstep?' Rankar asked Janier.  
'Would that put an end to whatever threat he may have devised since we last warred with him?'

'Perhaps not, my Lord,' Janier said. 'But the thought of him entering our home revolts me. I feel only grief will follow should he come into the Garden.'

I agree,' Tier said. 'Better the enemy at our doorstep than in our home. Kratine is too dangerous a force to be allowed to move among our people. I beg you deny his request, my Lord.'

'Perhaps he has come in peace,' Rankar said, 'and we would be in violation of the natural order to shun him.'

'Impossible,' Tier said.

I respectfully implore my Lord not to forget the past, 'Janier said.

Rankar turned to Chaneen. 'What are your thoughts, my wife? Amongst us four, you alone did not fight the Asurians last time. Your view may be the clearest. Should we hear what Kratine has to say?'

Chaneen hesitated before answering. She had no desire to be involved in matters that could lead to death and destruction. Rankar knew that. Why did he ask her? He must have his reasons. He always did.

'You are my King,' Chaneen said. I see already it is your desire to face him again. Do so.'

Rankar turned back to Janier and Tier. 'Allow Kratine to pass our borders. But keep his two companions at bay, and send a swift group of scouts over the mountains and into the desert beyond. See if these three Asurians are the only ones who want to enter our land.'

'I implore you to consider longer upon this matter,' Tier said.

'Myself included, my Lord,' Janier said. 'He is hideous.'

Rankar bowed his head. I have already considered this matter for longer than you know. That is why I bid you do as I say.'

Janier and Tier bowed and left.

That evening, close to sunset, a late-night chill arrived on the lap of a foul-smelling breeze. It was then Janier and Tier returned to the palace with Kratine, standing to either side of him, their swords drawn. Chaneen and Rankar greeted the Asurian King in their throne room, which was open to the sky, and had streams of flowing water on either side.

'Kratine,' Rankar said. 'We pray you have come in peace and welcome you in such spirit.'

Kratine bowed low in respect. Chaneen was surprised at his physical form. He did not appear as an Asurian should, but rather, as a human being. How cunning of Kratine, Chaneen thought, to try and soothe their memories by taking such a shape. Yet she was not deceived. Looking into Kratine's eyes, which regarded her with a semblance of warmth, she saw only hate.

'Thank you, Rankar,' Kratine said, for granting me this audience. Thanks, also, for honoring me with the presence of your companion. We of Asure have heard many a tale of the wonder and beauty of Chaneen. It is indeed a joy to find that those tales fell short in glorifying her.' Kratine bowed again. Chaneen chose to remain silent. Kratine added,

glancing out of the corners of his eyes, 'Would it be possible, if only for a night, to forget the tragedies we both suffered in the past? I would have these two brave warriors stand at ease.'

'As you wish.' Rankar nodded. 'Put down your swords Janier and Tier. This is a season of peace. We will listen to the words of our visitor with open hearts. Tell us of your mind, Kratine.'

'The plight of Asure is grave,' Kratine said. 'Our land grows cold, our waters dry. The light dims. With each passing cycle, my people, once proud and strong, weaken. Many more cycles and we will perish altogether. I tell you this now, as I should have in the past, so that you will understand why we fought to claim your Garden for our own. I hope that you will be able to find the compassion in your heart to forgive us. We were desperate then, we are desperate now. But in those days, I felt if we were to survive, then we would need your land, all of your land. This was a personal decision on my part, not a decision of my people. I was King then as I am now. I am to blame for the wrongs that were committed in the past.'

I know of your people's plight,' Rankar said. 'What do you now propose? How may I help you?'

I beg you to allow us to live peacefully beyond your mountains,' Kratine said. 'Far from your Garden, but still within the confines of your land.' He paused. 'If you deny us this request, Rankar, then you condemn a great race to death.'

'I feel your concern for your people to be genuine,' Rankar replied. 'The Asurians cannot last long without their waters. Even with your efforts to conserve, I know your rivers grow shallower with each passing cycle. But I am reminded of a time when you entered my lands and were not content with the desert beyond the mountains, but tried to enter our Garden and have it for your own. How can I be reassured you would not try to do the same thing again?'

'There is nothing I can say,' Kratine replied, 'that can erase the evils I inflicted on your people. But that is the problem I have thought long and hard about. What could I do to



show we are sincere? At length the basis of the distrust became clear to me, and the way to get rid of it. Our people, Rankar, are much alike.'

'We are nothing like you, 'Janier hissed.

Kratine glanced Janier's way and a smile broke on his face.

'Be still, child,' Rankar said. 'Please continue, Kratine.'

'Yes, my Lord,' Kratine said, although his gaze lingered upon Janier. She attempted to meet his stare but had to break away and look at the floor. Kratine went on, 'As I was saying, we are much alike. At present you fear and dislike us because we seem, outwardly, to be so alien. But if you knew us, the way we live and labor, you would understand that we possess your same love for life, your same desire for beauty and joy. I have asked you to allow us to inhabit the lands on the other side of your great mountains. But I believe that in time there would come a mingling of our people, in a peaceful and beneficial manner.'

'But you are of a separate origin,' Rankar said. 'Would it not be a violation of the natural order for us to mingle in the way you describe?'

'That is a misunderstanding,' Kratine said. 'One I have come to your Garden to correct. The natural order is progressive. It can always be improved.'

'You speak of ways of life, 'Janier said. I have heard stories of your Asurian ways. They disgust me.'

Again Kratine turned his attention to Janier. 'Stories, my child ? What are stories? Would you deny us a chance to prove ourselves as worthy of life as the Sastra?' Kratine smiled. 'Are you afraid to see the truth?'

I am afraid of nothing, 'Janier said.

'How do you propose to demonstrate this truth?' Rankar asked.

'Very easily, my Lord,' Kratine said. 'Allow an exchange of our people, two of your race for two of mine. A male and a female would be ideal. With your people living in Asure, and mine living here, a deep appreciation for each other's culture will naturally spring up. Then the differences and hostilities between us will dissolve, and be shown for the illusions they are.'

'Would you be one of those who will remain in our Garden?' Rankar asked.

I would not allow it,' Tier said quickly.

'No,' Kratine said. 'The two who wait at the edge of your fair Garden have traveled with me with the hope that they may have the privilege.'

'Why a man and a woman?' Rankar asked.

'It is of no particular importance,' Kratine said. 'But I feel that a male and female of your race would give my people a more complete understanding of the Sastra. I'm sure my Lord can see the wisdom of what I say.'

'This is all you wish at present?' Rankar asked. 'This exchange of people?'

'Yes,' Kratine said. 'We have no desire to enter any portion of your lands without first reassuring your people that we come in peace.'

'What if after a cycle of this exchange I do not feel reassured?' Rankar asked. 'What if the couple I choose to send to your land still feels that you are a threat, even after living with you?'

'I pray that will not be the case,' Kratine said. 'But should it be so, what can we do? We do not have the strength we did ages ago. As you well know, we cannot defeat the Sastra in battle,' Kratine added. 'Not with your powers supporting them.'

Chaneen sensed that he was downplaying the Asurians' might. Nevertheless, she was confused, for Kratine's offer seemed reasonable.

'Who would arrange for the transportation of my two people?' Rankar asked.

I will personally accompany them to my home,' Kraline said. 'My bridge is waiting at the edge of your deserts.'

'Do you have any preference who I send?' Rankar asked. 'Besides that they be a male and a female?'

'No, my Lord,' Kratine said. 'But two of your strongest might be best. My people admire strength, and such a couple could demonstrate to my people how worthy the Sastra are of respect.' He appraised Tier and Janier. 'Perhaps these two warriors would be a good choice. Their spirit appears good.'

I have your word they would not be harmed?' Rankar asked. 'You swear on the name of Asure?'

Kratine nodded.

'Do you?' Rankar insisted.

Kratine bowed. 'Yes, my Lord. Nothing will be done to arouse your wrath. And I feel at ease with those I leave behind, knowing that above all else you would take no action that would harm your own children.'

Chaneen felt both truth and deceit in his words. Rankar must be equally aware, she thought. She watched as her husband sat back in his throne after a thoughtful pause.

I will consider your request and meet with you tomorrow, Kratine,' Rankar said. 'Tonight you may stay in our palace, and enjoy its comforts.'

I appreciate the invitation to stay,' Kratine said. 'But I must decline. No Asurian will stay in your Garden until your final decision has been made. But I am anxious to return tomorrow to see what that decision may be. Already I sense your consent, am I not correct, Lord Rankar?'

'Your goal to remove hostilities between our peoples is noble,' Rankar said. 'Still, I must confer with those I might choose to send. Tomorrow, Kratine, come when the sun stands at its peak.'

'Very well,' Kratine said. 'However, if the time is not important, I will visit your palace a bit later, after the sun has set. If my Lord permits?'

'Fine,' Rankar said. 'My warriors waiting at the front of the palace will escort you to the edge of the Garden.'

'Until tomorrow, Rankar,' Kratine said. He bowed and left. Chaneen felt a great heaviness depart from the room. Tier and her sister approached the throne.

I will go, Rankar,' Tier said. I will go and seek for signs of deceit in the Asurians.'

'We already know of their deceptions,' Janier told her husband. 'Everything changes through time,' Rankar said. 'Would you go, Janier, should I ask?'

Janier nodded slowly, 'Should my Lord ask.' 'But,' Chaneen whispered.

'Yes, Chaneen?' Rankar said.

Chaneen met her sister's eyes and saw doubt, but also great courage. Janier's boast to Kratine had not been an idle one.

'Whatever my Lord wishes,' Chaneen said.

Rankar nodded. 'Go my children, and see to the progress of our scouts. I will discuss this matter further with Chaneen this evening.'

Chaneen found Rankar later in the night, strolling alone by the pool of waters in the center of their palace. His light was grave and thoughtful, and she walked by his side without speaking. It was a clear night; the stars shone bright above their heads without twinkling.

'Kratine is very old, Chaneen,' Rankar said at last. 'As old as his land. Did you know that?'

'So I have heard, my Lord.'

'What did you think of his form?'

'A clever disguise,' Chaneen said. 'But I saw no reason for it since we all knew what it was.'

'Kratine would do nothing without a reason.' Rankar knelt at the edge of the pool. The surrounding pillars rose straight above their heads, creating in their ceiling a wide-open window into the heavens. Rankar set the reflecting stars in the pool dancing with a touch of his hand in the water. Chaneen folded her gown about her knees and sat leaning against his side. He continued, 'And you say disguise, my wife. I wonder if it wasn't more than that, if it was not an ancient memory being relived. Have you not also heard that the Asurians were once different in shape? That they were once like us?'

'It is difficult to imagine,' Chaneen said.

'Nevertheless, it is true.'

'How did they change so?'

'We are at our beginning,' Rankar said. 'They are at their end. Perhaps it is for them as it will be for us.'

Chaneen shuddered. I would not wish it so.'

Rankar shook his head. 'Kratine does not wish to face his end. He fears it greatly, and I find that strange. The Asurians have had many

cycles to learn what was their right, and still they are not content. They want more time. They want our land.'

'Would they try again to take it from us?'

Rankar sighed. 'You heard him. He is full of deceit. He would destroy us if he could.'

Chaneen was disappointed. She had hoped, in spite of her own feelings, that Kratine was sincere. 'Does he have the strength to destroy us?' she asked.

'He lost many in the last war. But Asurians breed rapidly, as we do not. I believe that if there is another war, both sides will be so hurt that neither will be able to survive as a people.'

'Then he won't attack. He would be foolish to try.'

'If his own doom is certain, Kratine will attack just to bring us down with him.'

Chaneen closed her eyes briefly. 'I cannot see that.'

Rankar looked to the sky. 'What concerns me more is the hidden course he might adopt. One that would destroy us - as he surely intends - and leave his own people unharmed. In our talk with him he may have made an error and given us a clue as to his true designs.

He said, "And I feel at ease with those I leave behind, knowing that above all else you would take no action that would harm your own children."

I do not understand,' Chaneen said.

'Kratine would try to turn our strength into weakness. He knows he cannot attack us directly with hope of success, as he has proven to himself in the past at great loss. But perhaps he has devised a plan whereby he can come at us from within.'

'How could he do such a thing?'

'He asked for Tier and Janier.'

Chaneen felt a chill, the same cold she had felt that evening while looking in Kratine's eyes. 'But they are ours,' she protested.

Rankar took her hands in his. 'They are ours now. But should they go to Asure, they may become otherwise.'

'What are you saying?' Chaneen cried.

Rankar let go of her and slipped his hands into the waters again. I

only suspect, I do not know. Kratine's thoughts are difficult to fathom, but he is always shrewd. He plays on my desire to understand. He asks for Tier and Janier. He promises he will give an intimate look into Asurian ways. He tempts me with dangerous bait. But he knows that whatever fate Janier and Tier meet in Asure, we would be unable to destroy them when they returned - should their destruction prove necessary.'



Chaneen moaned. 'Why would we have to destroy them, my Lord? Would he change them?'

I do not know how or in which manner. But, yes, that is what I think he has planned.'

Chaneen shook her head, overwhelmed. 'Could he have given us his clue intentionally?'

'Perhaps,' Rankar said.

'But we must be certain. If he did want us to know these things, then his motives must be complex. Can't you penetrate his thoughts from within?'

'Not from here. Outside his domain, Kratine is like a shadow that gives off no light. It has always been that way.'

Chaneen pointed to the pool. 'Invoke the gods, then, and ask for their guidance. They will help us.'

Rankar nodded. 'Yes, we will have an invocation tonight. But not to seek guidance. I have already come to my decision. Tonight's invocation will be for the purpose of instruction. You must learn the secret of how to bring the fire.'

Chaneen was filled with anguish. 'Your decision? What is it, my Lord? Why do I need to know the secret of the fire?'

'I am going to return with Kratine to Asure.'

'No you cannot go. You say Kratine is filled with deceit. If you're harmed all the children will be swept away.'

'Would you have me send Tier or your sister?'

'No! None should go. We need not befooled by Kratine's wicked invitation. Surely you see that, my Lord?'

I cannot see what I do not understand. We cannot go your way.

Chaneen. Eventually, as Kratine's land fails further, he will be forced to attack, and we will all perish. Or he will try to ruin us in another manner, which will probably be through the corruption of our own children. No, I must discover the secret of his design and prepare a defense against it. Your sister and her husband can't do this. Only I can do this. I must go to Asure.'

'Send me instead, my Lord.'

'No. I cannot risk you.'

'But I cannot risk you,' she cried.

'It is the only way.'

'No. There is another. Destroy them...' Chaneen stopped herself, feeling the pain of her own words.

'Try to kill Kratine now?' Rankar asked. 'I have considered that. It would not be possible without summoning great force, and that very force would lay waste to the Garden. Kratine would not die easily, and his entire army would quickly follow in attack if he did die. You realize, too, Chaneen, that neither of us can be the first one to attack. It is against our nature.'

'You are leaving me,' Chaneen whispered, tears rolling over her cheeks and into the starry pool, where they sent a ripple across the universe she hoped the gods could feel. Rankar took her hands once more.

'I am sorry, Chaneen. I know you asked for none of this. But the flow of time is washing away our season of peace, and it is inevitable. We are being called upon to defend the natural order, for I deem Kratine is preparing to challenge the cycle of life and death itself, and pervert it to his own aims. But if he does this, I can assure you it will be his downfall. He cannot defy the highest gods without bringing down upon himself a power that has never been unleashed before, not even by me in the last war. That much is certain. Yet whether Kratine will bring the Sastra to ruin with him is still in doubt.'

'What is this power you speak of?' Chaneen asked. 'Is it not the secret of the fire?'

'It is the same, yet it is much greater. Tonight you will be shown the way of it. But I pray the gods never allow it to enter your being. If they

do, then it will mean that the end had already come and gone. But let me begin our invocation, so that you may learn the origin of fire, and the birth of the different lands.'

The next evening, not long after the sun had set, Kratine appeared before their throne. Tier and fanier flanked his sides, their swords sheathed in their belts. After the instruction of the previous night, Chaneen understood that their weapons were of no use against the Asurian king.

Kratine bowed. I await my Lord's decision.'

'Your two companions may stay in our Garden,' Rankar said. 'They will be well cared for.'

Kratine smiled. 'And the two who will accompany me?'

'There will be only one,' Rankar said.

Kratine hesitated. 'One, my Lord? Is that wise?'

'I will return with you to Asure, Kratine,' Rankar said.

A tremor shook Kratine's disguise and his form became less substantial. Chaneen glimpsed a huge head, dripping teeth, and red eyes. She also sensed a whirlwind of emotions, pleasure and triumph, coupled with surprise and fear. Finally his disguise turned steady once more, and he threw Janier a sharp glance. She retreated as if she had been struck. Then Kratine laughed.

'Very well, Rankar,' he said. 'Asure's honor will be that much greater. We will depart tonight.'

His sweet words were false, Chaneen thought, as false as the human flesh he wore. She knew Rankar was walking into a trap, and as her husband turned to bid her farewell, she also knew that she would never see him again.

Days later, in the middle of the night, Janier came to Chaneen while she meditated by the waters of the palace. Chaneen did not stand to greet her. She merely opened her eyes and

said, 'You bring me sad tidings, sister. What has become of our Lord?' Janier knelt by her side, pain and fury burning in her face. 'Our

scouts found afresh group of Asurians on the far side of the mountains.'

'What were they doing?' Chaneen asked.

'They carried Rankar's ring. Our warriors slew them.'

Chaneen found her breathing labored. 'You have his ring?' The rings were a gift from the gods to Rankar and herself. They symbolized their love for all the Sastra. Chaneen looked at the one on her own hand and found it dull in the night air.

'Yes,' Janier said.

'Give it to me.'

Janier hesitated, then drew forth Rankar's hewed finger from the folds of her gown. Rankar's ring shone brilliantly on what was left of his mangled flesh. Chaneen took his finger with shaking hands and pulled off the ring. Janier trembled by her side.

'Chaneen,' she said. 'There is more bad news. A massive army of Asurian warriors has landed upon the far desert, through a bridge of Kratine's design. It is a force of tremendous size. They march this way at great speed.'

'Can we stand against them without Rankar?'

'I am asking you, my Queen, 'Janier said.

For Chaneen there was confusion amidst her grief. Kratine shouldn't have been able to kill her husband, yet he had done so. Now all the Sastra were vulnerable. Indeed, they were doomed unless she called upon the Fire Messenger. But that was a power she had prayed never to have to use, a power that paradoxically relied upon her desire to summon it.

'What of the two Asurians Kratine left behind?' Chaneen asked. 'What do they have to say about this approaching army?'

'They have nothing to say. Tier cut off their heads.'

'I see,' Chaneen whispered. 'What is Tier doing now?'

'He has assembled the greater part of our people for battle. He awaits your commands.'

'My commands,' Chaneen echoed weakly.

'Chaneen?'

'Have him cross the mountains as quickly as possible, and attack the

Asurian army on the open desert, where my children can use their superior speed. Tell him to fight by day when he can. Kratine and his people crave the light, but are weakened by it. But Janier, you are to return to me after relaying these instructions. You are not to go into battle, not yet.'

'But I must fight, 'Janier protested.

'You will fight, you need not worry about that. But first you must stay by my side. Go now, then, and tell Tier that the gods will not forsake us in our time of need. Just be careful to return, my sister.'

I will do my Queen's bidding. 'Janier bowed and left the palace, running with the speed of the wind that was rising out of the west. Chaneen set aside the bloody ring and closed her eyes. Rankar was dead. Now it was up to her to guard her children. Yet, despite all that had happened, she still didn't desire vengeance.

## TWELVE

There would be no white Christmas this year, Terry thought. He stood by a window in Dr Palmer's waiting room, looking down twenty stories at the late shoppers scurrying from store to store like so many busy ants. A hot, humid front had rolled in from the Gulf and was now stagnating over the city. If it wasn't for the crowds, one would never know it was Christmas Eve. Fortunately, Terry had purchased his presents early. For Lauren he had bought a water bed, which was being shipped to his cabin, and for Jennifer, a typewriter that could be programmed to form characters similar to her own handwriting. Jennifer had been writing a lot these days and deserved better than a ballpoint pen. Dr Palmer, her new shrink, viewed her writing as therapeutic. He thought it helped her to work out subconscious fears, a remark that gave Terry one more reason to think psychiatrists didn't know what they were talking about. Dr Palmer didn't even know what Jennifer was writing. She never showed her stuff to anybody.

The only reason Terry had taken Jennifer to Dr Palmer in the first place was because he had been desperate. Her nightmares were murdering her. She had lost ten pounds from her already thin frame, and she was having trouble functioning during the day. The doctor had come highly recommended from his partner at the paper, Tom Brenner, whose two ex-wives had praised Palmer highly. Initially the doctor had prescribed thrice-weekly sessions and potent sleeping pills for Jennifer. The latter had brought some relief; however, it was Jennifer herself who had proved her best doctor. She'd suggested she stay up at night and sleep in the day. She'd been out of school, anyway - they understood she

was ill - so Terry let her try it. If she thought it would help, fine; and the rescheduling did bring great relief. The nightmares appeared unable to thwart her while the sun was in the sky. After work he would come home and wake her and together they would prepare dinner - or breakfast, whatever. Then they would write, he on his new novel, on which he was actually making some progress, and she on her mysterious story. She was a painstaking worker. She spent many hours to get a piece 'just as it was, Terry.'

Near midnight they would go for a long walk through the deserted streets of Houston. The regular exercise made them both feel better. It was weird, but while walking with Jennifer he never worried about getting mugged. When he was with her, he no longer felt he was even in the city, but in a wide-open space where any potential danger could be seen coming from far off. Certainly her lively conversation had a way of transporting his mind to better places.

She always wore the silver ring Professor James Ranoth had given her. It was not magical in the way Jim thought, she said confidently, but it did help her write her story. He wasn't sure what she meant. He had never been much into jewelry.

They talked about Lauren a lot, of course. In a way their entire life was now little more than a process of killing time, of waiting. Occasionally, though, Terry wondered if they were waiting for the same thing.

'Mr Hayes,' Dr Palmer's secretary said behind him. 'You

may go in now. Jennifer and the doctor are finished.'

Thank you.' He started down the hall toward the back office.

'Oh, Mr Hayes?' the secretary called.



He stopped. 'Yes?'

'Your fiancée's almost there, isn't she? I read in your paper they'll awake on the fourth of January.'

'You're right. But even then they'll have five days before they officially enter Martian orbit. It'll be six days before they land on the planet.'

'It must be exciting, knowing someone who's doing such great things.'

Terry resisted the temptation to tell her he wished Lauren was a dental assistant. 'It's a great privilege,' he said.

The secretary stood. She was a perky blonde, fresh out of college and looking for a Mr Goodbar. He'd seen the type before, and had had plenty of sex with them until they found out he was broke. Palmer's secretary went out of her way to keep him company while Jennifer talked with Dr Palmer.

'I have so much shopping still to do, Mr Hayes,' she said. 'I wish I had someone to help me.'

'Call me Terry, Carol. All my friends who are still alive do.'

Carol chuckled. 'I have to leave now. I won't get a chance to see you on the way out. I wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas.'

'Merry Christmas,' he said. 'To you and your family.'

She blushed. 'Oh, I'm not married, Terry.'

Famous and exciting Dr Lauren Wagner notwithstanding, Carol was dropping hints. Terry didn't mind. He liked aggressive women or rather, horny women, who were not always the same. Yet he was being a good boy, and it wasn't

too hard. After Lauren, most women bored him. Carol certainly did.

'But you have a mother and father,' he said. 'You probably have aunts and uncles. Maybe even nieces and nephews. One of them has got to want to go shopping with you.'

Carol didn't know what the hell he was talking about. So she smiled. 'That's a great idea.'

He turned away. 'I'll see you after the holidays.'

'I'll look forward to it,' she said brightly.

Once in the doctor's office, Terry took a seat beside Jennifer, who was sitting in an oak chair three sizes too big for her and swinging her feet inches above an Indian carpet that depicted a scary scene of angels clashing with devils. Dr Palmer sat behind his desk and fought with his beeper, which wouldn't stop beeping. He was a nice man, although he was extremely ugly. He had been injured in a car accident as a teenager. His face had gone through a window and wrapped around a fire hydrant. At least that's how he put it. Plastic surgery hadn't worked well in his case, nor did his beard and moustache hide the rough spots. Oh, well, Terry thought, the man seemed happy enough, and he certainly charged enough an hour.

'How do things look this week?' Terry asked.

'Ted doesn't want to see me for two weeks,' Jennifer said. 'He says I'm all better. I told him I was never sick.'

Dr Palmer nodded. 'I'm beginning to believe her. She's more sane than me. Especially now that the nightmares are going away. I suggested to her that she start sleeping at night again and return to school.'

'How about that, Jenny?' Terry asked. 'You can't be an owl the rest of your life.'

Jennifer giggled. 'Whooo says?'

'I think you're just trying to dodge school,' Terry said.

'Which is a definite sign of mental health,' Dr Palmer added. Jennifer shook her head. 'I can't sleep at night. Not yet. But I'll finish my story soon, and then, maybe.'

Dr Palmer stood. He left his beeper beeping on his desk. 'You two can decide amongst yourselves. As far as I'm concerned, the crisis is past. I'll see Jenny in two weeks. Now I must rush. I have presents to buy, lots of expensive presents for lots of greedy relatives.'

Terry stood and took Jennifer's hand. 'I should have postponed the appointment,' he said. 'Carol tells me you had nobody else scheduled for today.'

Dr Palmer fetched his hat. 'Nonsense. Talking to Jenny is like a Christmas present. I've found myself waiting to see her again each week. In fact, I'm not sending you a bill for the last month.'

'I suppose I should argue with you,' Terry said. 'But I wasn't going to pay you anyway.' Dr Palmer laughed. Terry pointed to the beeping beeper. 'Don't you want to call in and see who wants you?'

'It's just my wife,' Dr Palmer said.

'How can you tell?' Jennifer asked.

'It beeps differently when she calls in,' Dr Palmer said. He led them toward the door, a hand on their backs. 'Oh, Mr Hayes, is your book about Ricky in the stores yet? I want to buy a copy for my wife. She hates bugs.'

Terry scowled. 'There was a screw up at the printers. Its release has been delayed two months.'

'Are you upset?' Dr Palmer asked.

'If I am, I'm sure it's because I hated my mother,' Terry said.

Dr Palmer laughed again. 'You should have my job and let me write about cockroaches.' He scooted them out the door. 'Now you two run along and have a merry Christmas.'

'Merry Christmas, Doctor,' Terry said.

'Merry Christmas, Ted,' Jennifer said.

Outside in the heat and crowds, Terry asked Jennifer, 'How about spending tomorrow at my sister's? She called and said she'd love to have us. You could hang out with my niece, Rebecca. She's your age. You met her once.'

'Hmmm,' Jennifer considered. 'If you want, Terry. But I was thinking how nice it would be to play in the snow. There's snow at your cabin. I read it in the paper.'

'There's Daniel at my cabin,' Terry said. They had visited Wyoming twice since Lauren had left for Mars, enough times for Daniel to have fallen completely under Jennifer's spell. He worshiped her. Jennifer thought he was pretty neat, too.

Jennifer blushed. 'That's not the only reason. The lake will be frozen. We can go ice skating.'

'I don't know about that. It's a big lake. Even when it freezes, there are thin spots. I'd hate to fall in those cold waters. Your muscles would cramp in a second. I remember Lauren told me a girl drowned in the lake at the end of summer because of cramps. Oh, you know about her. Daniel told you both.'

Jennifer looked at him. 'Daniel didn't say anything about a girl drowning.'

'Lauren said he told you both. I remember.'

'No girl drowned. You can ask Daniel when we get there.'

Terry chuckled. 'When we get there?'

Jennifer grabbed his hand and pulled him in the direction of his car. 'Let's hurry! We have to pack. We can use your work credit card to pay for the airline tickets. Daniel told me he makes wonderful snowmen.'

Terry allowed himself to be dragged down the street, on his way to Wyoming. The paper had been on him to take his

vacation time anyway. 'We have to be back in Houston when Lauren wakes up,' he said. 'We can't stay forever.'

Jennifer stopped and gave him one of her patented penetrating looks. 'I want to stay there until she returns, Terry.'

'That won't be possible.'

'Then let's all go there together as soon as she comes home.'

He shrugged. 'What if Lauren wants to go to Disneyland?'

Jennifer was insistent. 'You have to promise me, Terry. It's important.'

'All right,' he said, not sure what the big deal was.

They were still in Wyoming on January 3rd. Christmas had been pleasant. Jennifer loved her typewriter. From the sound of the keys, she was already typing better than forty words a minute. She continued to work seriously on her story. She had bought him a Ping-Pong table; or she said she had - it was in Houston. She gave him a single paddle wrapped up. Terry figured she must have been saving the allowance NASA sent her out

of Lauren's salary. The gift was a stroke of brilliance on her part. Throughout college he had played regularly and had loved it. Yet, to the best of his knowledge, he could not remember telling either Lauren or Jennifer about how much he enjoyed the game. He was looking forward to it.

Jennifer had also knitted Terry a scarf, which was coming in handy on this particular vacation. Through the cabin window, Terry could see the snow falling steadily on the nearby trees. Daniel was visiting; he had just returned inside with a pile of fresh logs. Jennifer had a roaring fire going. Together the kids sat beside the flames, talking quietly.

Terry turned away from the video phone, excited. He had just spoken to friends at Mission Control. 'Jenny, Daniel,' he said, 'Houston says Lauren will be awake at six tomorrow evening. We should catch the twelve o'clock flight back.'

Jennifer was running her right hand through the flames, a habit of hers that always made Terry nervous. Actually, her running was more of a stroll. He didn't see how she didn't burn herself.

'We won't be able to talk to her, though,' Jennifer said, gloomy. 'We'll have to wait a long time to hear what she says, and then she'll have to wait a long time to hear us.'

'You can't argue with the speed of light,' Terry said. 'But we can still have a conversation, in a way. We'll get to see her on the screen.'

'She'll be on the TV,' Jennifer said. 'If we stayed here we can see her just the same.'

'You don't want to be at Mission Control while they're exploring Mars?' Terry asked, amazed.

'I want to be here,' she said.

'I can't figure you out,' Terry said.

'I haven't finished my story,' Jennifer said.

'I hardly see what that has to do with anything,' Terry said.

'She's gone,' Jennifer said softly. 'She'll be just a picture on the screen. She'll be only a voice on the speaker. I feel closer to Lauren here, where we had fun together.'

'But I can't stay, even if I wanted to,' Terry said. 'I'm covering the exploration for the paper. You know that. I have to be at Mission Control. Anyway, I want to be as close to the action as possible.'

'Here is closer,' Jennifer said in the same serious tone, watching the flames, her long yellow hair shining in the orange light. 'Lauren liked here best. When she's on Mars, she'll think of being here. She loved the forest and the lake. You go if you have to. I can stay with Daniel and his brother. I'll come here each day to work on my story, and we can talk on the phone. You can tell me what is happening with Lauren.'

'Daniel?' Terry asked, appealing for help. That was a mistake. Apparently plans had already been made.

'Yes, sir,' Daniel said briskly. 'My brother said Jenny can stay with us. He and his wife like her a lot. You know, we don't live far.'

'But Lauren will want to hear your voice when she wakes up, Jenny,' Terry said. 'She'll worry.'



Jennifer sighed. 'I can't speak with her when she's there.'

'Aren't you being a little ridiculous?' Terry said.

She was suddenly upset. 'I don't want to go! I don't want to know.' She added in a whisper, 'I'm afraid.'

'There's nothing to be afraid of,' Terry said. 'Their ship can't fail. It's been tested a million times. Plus there is nothing on Mars that can harm them.'

Jennifer waved her hand through the flames again, so slowly that Terry suddenly sat straight up in his chair and almost yelled. Yet her flesh remained unaffected. The silver ring on her right thumb shone bright in the hot light.

'It's cold on Mars,' Jennifer said.

Terry was impatient. 'You're beginning to run away from stuff. You know that, don't you?'

A log in the fireplace cracked loudly, spewing forth a shower of sparks that momentarily glittered around her small form. Jennifer slowly knelt back on her ankles. Daniel watched her intently, with a peculiar look in his eyes that Terry found disturbing.

Maybe he does really worship her.

'I'm sorry, Terry,' Jennifer said. 'But I must be here when Lauren thinks of Earth and dreams of coming home.'

When she returns, she will have to come here, no matter what. This place will be in her mind like an important picture she thinks she's lost.'

Daniel nodded gravely. 'Yeah.'

Terry snorted. 'You're talking a bunch of nonsense.'

'I'm not leaving,' Jennifer said plainly.

Terry sighed in resignation. She was one kid he had never been able to control. He doubted anyone could have. 'I'll tell Lauren you're in good hands,' he said.

'You will tell her everything about me,' Jennifer said.

## THIRTEEN

Lauren Wagner's first conscious sensation was of floating, a feeling of being suspended in a colorless fluid where there was neither light nor darkness. She could have been in her mother's womb, and for a long time she drifted without the distracting motion of thoughts or images. She was resting, she knew that much, and she did not want to be disturbed.

After what seemed an eternity, she realized she was waking up. Memories sprouted. Her name was Lauren Wagner. She was a famous astronaut, and a surgeon, too. Soon she would be going to Mars. There was much to do, much to learn. She would have to leave

Jennifer and Terry. It was a shame, but it wasn't going to happen today. It was going to happen tomorrow. Now nothing mattered and everything could wait.

Lauren began to go back to sleep.

However, a voice spoke in her ear and suddenly Lauren remembered where she was, and that she had already left her family.

[You are waking up nicely, Lauren. Make no effort to move. Talk only if comfortable.]

I'm the doctor here.

She opened her eyes.

Except for the faint glow of her monitors, the ship was dark. Yet even as she watched, a dull red light streamed

through the window above her hibernaculum. It took her more than a minute to realize the light was coming from Mars. A bleep from her monitors cautioned her not to get too excited. She closed her eyes and took slow deep breaths. Her ribs felt tight. She wiggled a toe, which cracked loudly. Starting at her feet and moving slowly toward her head, she systematically contracted and relaxed all her major muscles. After a while she was able to move her arms and legs comfortably. Again she opened her eyes, this time studying the monitors closely. Everyone was alive and doing well. She noticed that her own blood was no longer circulating from the shunt in her arm. It was strange to think how many times it had been reprocessed while she slept.

'Open a line to Houston, Friend,' Lauren whispered.

[Yes, Lauren.]

Mission Control would expect a profound statement: One long sleep for man, one big nightmare for mankind. Lauren moistened her throat. 'This is Dr Wagner. How is Earth?'

Twenty minutes would elapse before they received her message. Lauren tried to imagine the reaction. There would be a celebration. People would slap each other on the back and shake hands. Bottles of champagne would be opened. Jennifer and Terry would be there to enjoy it.

'Open the lid on my hibernaculum, Friend.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

There was a sharp hiss and then a blast of cold air. Lauren shivered. 'What is the internal temperature of the Nova, Friend?'

[Seventy-six degrees Fahrenheit, Lauren.]

'Raise it ten degrees. Give me manual control of the other hibernaculums.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

Lauren halted the circulation of the Antabolene in her friends' bodies and began to warm their hibernaculums. Then she pulled herself upright with great effort and peered out the nearby porthole. The others would not awaken for hours. She was alone with a view no other living human being had seen. Through the porthole, Mars was twice the size of the

Moon as seen from Earth, richly colored, with dazzling white polar caps that topped a haunting red globe. If nothing else, she thought, they had come this far.

Lauren began to massage her legs, noting with displeasure how her muscle tone had gone flat and her color had faded. She would have to start walking immediately, and she would be first under the sun lamp, and to hell with what Gary said.

'I want a warm glass of juice, Friend,' she said.

[Which flavor would you prefer, Lauren?]

'Coconut pineapple.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

A thin green tube extended from the wall near her head, and she sucked on the juice. It removed a bad taste in her mouth and gave her a new level of strength. 'This is good,' she said.

[Yes, Lauren.]

'Turn on the auxiliary lamps in section B.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

Soft yellow light flooded her compartment. Across from her, Jessica and Bill lay like black statues in their hibernaculums.

'Is the Nova in good shape, Friend?' she asked.

[Yes, Lauren.]

'Very good. I want to hear some music, vocal level. Put on a disc of the rock group called the Doors.'

[Which one, Lauren?]

'I don't know. Which one is Jim's favorite?' [I'm not sure, Lauren. He often plays 'Strange Days.'] "'Strange days.'" Lauren muttered. 'Yes, that sounds appropriate. Put that one on, Friend.' [Yes, Lauren.]

By the time Lauren was able to walk without support she had heard all of 'Strange Days,' 'Waiting for the Sun,' and 'The Soft Parade.' Jim was right - it was wonderful music.

Four hours later the rest of the crew had all revived, as weak as newborn kittens. Lauren was in communication with Houston and was surprised to find that Jennifer was not at Mission Control. In a taped message - with the time delay, they were all taped - Terry explained she was staying in Wyoming with Daniel and his family. Lauren assumed that meant Jennifer was not in school, which she wasn't crazy about. Terry also said that he was working on his book, and that she had received an erotic gift from Santa for Christmas. He looked uncomfortable talking into his camera. Lauren sent him a return message saying she was sure his present would get plenty of use. She didn't press him about Jennifer's absence. It was very good to see him again.

She figured NASA listened to her message a few seconds before Terry heard it. No doubt the president was still worried about national security.

Using the best of Friend's freeze-dried formulas, Lauren cooked breakfast for the starving sleepyheads: a glass of powdered milk and a thin vegetable soup. Jim, who was now sitting up in bed, asked if he could have a cup of coffee. Lauren reminded him that he had been sleeping for over three months and that of course he couldn't have any coffee. Gary told Jim from across the room that he had a bottle of Scotch tucked away and that he would be more

than happy to share his wealth as soon as he was strong enough to fetch it.

Lauren immediately went to Gary's private locker, and did indeed find a fifth of Scotch, cleverly hidden beneath a mound of science fiction paperbacks, the latest issue of Playboy which was now three months old - and a framed picture of his mom and dad. While Jim and Gary howled helplessly in their hibernaculum, she poured the Scotch down the disposal chute.

Then on impulse she checked Jim's locker. She almost fell to the ship's axis with what she saw: two cans of instant coffee, five bags of Oreo cookies, ten bars of Swiss chocolate, two boxes of sugar jellies from England, and a giant lollipop from Disneyland. How he had smuggled the goods aboard a ship that had never been closer than two hundred miles to Earth was beyond Lauren. Knowing she had found his treasures, Jim begged her to have mercy. He promised not to eat any sweets for two days. Against her better judgment, she said OK. At least she knew now why he hadn't lost any weight at the isolation complex.

Outside their portholes, Mars grew. Three days had elapsed since they had awoken. Lauren leaned against the wall of their compact gym and watched as Jim labored uphill on a treadmill. There were wires attached to his chest and electrocardiogram lines tracing across a nearby screen. Lauren was worried. Jim's heartbeat was slightly irregular. He had MVP - Mitral Valve Prolapse. The condition was generally not serious. It was caused by a slight loosening of the tissue that held the mitral valve in place inside the heart. Most people who had MVP only noticed it when their hearts fluttered. Occasionally chest pain and shortness of breath could make the person think he was having a heart attack. But the symptoms came seldom, and never

led to a heart attack, unless there was an underlying pathology.

What worried Lauren was that Jim had not had MVP three months ago. Had the prolonged hibernation brought it on? She considered consulting with physicians back home. Yet she feared they might forbid his landing on Mars, just to be on the safe side. She knew that such a decision would devastate him.

It would probably cause him more stress than the exploration.

Lauren watched as he struggled to breathe through the mask that covered his mouth and nose. He was tiring already, and he had completed less than half his exercise time. She motioned for him to stop.

'I'm not tired,' he said, removing the respirator. 'Shouldn't I do another ten minutes, Lauren?'

She glanced at the screen again. 'Wait an hour. Then finish the other ten.'

He pointed to the peaks and valleys of his electrocardiogram. 'How am I doing?'

'OK. How do you feel?'

'Great. Now tell me, is there a problem?'

There was no sense in worrying him. Most people who had MVP didn't even know it, and lived happier lives because of the ignorance.



'You're fine,' she said. 'I just want you to come along a bit slower than the rest of us.' She plucked a white hair from his chest. 'Remember, you're our old man. If the Martians show up and want to wrestle, leave them to Gary and me.'

Now it was six days after awakening. They were strapped in the Hawk, preparing to break away from the Nova and land in the Utopia Planitia region, near the derelict Rover. Mark was alone at the Nova's controls. Since entering orbit, he

had photographed their first landing spot extensively through a high-powered telescope. After studying the pictures, and after a brief consultation with Houston, Bill had relocated their touchdown approximately two miles northwest of where the Rover had put down. Bill said the terrain was smoother there. Unfortunately, the next time they set down, in the volcanic Tharsis region where the Russians had landed, they would have one and only one touchdown area, a plateau located beside Olympus Mons, the tallest known mountain in the solar system.

Jim's MVP ceased to affect his endurance. Lauren didn't contact Houston and never did tell him about it. It was her first major medical decision on the mission, and she was not going by the book. She hoped she didn't live to regret it.

[Thirty seconds to break away.]

Friend's circuits were duplicated in full aboard the Hawk. He would continue as their faithful companion while they lived on the planet. Leaving half his brain in orbit didn't seem to bother him in the least.

'Give me a countdown from five, Friend,' Gary said, his voice calm.

[Five. Four. Three. Two. One.]

There was a gentle shove. Outside their windows, the Nova began to float slowly away.

'You're looking good,' Mark said over their headsets.

When they had drifted a couple of hundred yards, Gary rotated the Hawk, so that the ship's nose was pointed directly at Mars. Then he fired their auxiliary thrusters. As they coasted downwards, the red globe seemed to fall toward them, a huge ball ready to snuff out their puny existence. Because Mars had an atmosphere - thin though it was - their descent procedure was different than the one astronauts used to land on the moon. An atmosphere meant friction, and friction meant heat. Gary would use

that friction to break their speed. To counteract the heat, the Hawk was equipped with a ceramic tile shield, which would be jettisoned once they opened their parachutes.

So they coasted, for more than three hours, until the atmospheric drag began to make itself felt, at an altitude of approximately one hundred fifty miles. At that point Gary turned the heat shield in the direction of their fall. Their speed was three miles a second, but was diminishing rapidly. Lauren could feel the pressure of deceleration. Her breathing was labored and it was difficult to raise her arms. On Gary's screens Mars resolved into a landscape: ragged craters, wide-open sandy plains, twisting red valleys that cut like bloody incisions two miles deep. Lauren even caught a glimpse of Olympus Mons, far away but still clearly visible in the morning light, wreathed in ice clouds that condensed out of the upper atmosphere each dawn.

The Hawk began to vibrate. Gary sang to himself. He was a rocket man again. He was where he wanted to be, doing what he wanted. The temperature of their cabin rose sharply. Lauren began to perspire.

Fifteen miles above the ground their deceleration reached its maximum value. Here their descent vector turned parallel to the surface as the Hawk bobbed on the aerodynamic lift provided by the atmosphere. But the equilibrium was only temporary and soon their descent resumed. Not long after, four miles above the ground, their speed was less than

that of an ordinary passenger jet. Now Gary discarded the heat shield and opened their parachutes. Lauren suddenly felt as if she were standing on her head in a falling elevator. The Hawk was spinning. It was expected, and slowly the spin began to stop. Gary slid their shock-absorbing legs into position.

'Don't you want auto control?' Colonel Brent asked.

'Of course not,' Gary said.

[3900 feet.]

The parachutes were jettisoned. Simultaneously the Hawk's main engines fired. The roar was deafening. White-lined schematics of the terrain directly below crawled across the dark blue screens above Lauren's head. They were falling slowly, almost hovering. A blitz of sand began to bombard the hull, pushed upwards by the force of their rockets.

'Dust!' Bill shouted.

'Visibility still good!' Gary shouted back.

[500 feet. 300 feet.]

'Fuel?' Bill snapped.

[What, Bill?]

'Put her down, Major!' Bill ordered.

'That's what I'm doing!' Gary said.

[100 feet. 50 feet. 10 feet.]

There was a nerve-racking jolt, then a silence so complete it was unnerving.

[Touchdown.]

'Good job, Major,' Bill said.

'Goddamn,' Gary said to the billions listening on Earth.

After traveling four hundred million miles, they had reached their goal.

## FOURTEEN

Terry knew he was wearing a foolish smile, but it felt too good to take off. Kathy from California had on a grin of her own that was far from cool. They were sitting in the corner of a coffee shop not far from Mission Control, toying with glasses of milk and servings of uneaten pie, glancing at the TV in the corner where Colonel William Brent and Professor James Ranoth were walking on Mars. Terry thought he had been ready to see people walking on another planet, but every time he looked at the TV it just blew his mind. Soon Lauren would join them. His own woman. Christ, what a day.

'How can they get around with those bulky suits on?' Kathy asked.

'Lauren says wearing the suit is like being surrounded by an air bubble,' Terry said. 'They look heavier than they are. And don't forget the gravity is only one-third that of Earth's.'

Kathy rubbed her hands together for warmth. It was a cold rainy day in Houston. A draft from a nearby window was taking the steam out of their coffee. 'I can't wait till Gary's out there,' she said.

'That probably won't be for a while, from what we've heard,' Terry reminded her. 'He's fixing a generator.'

'It's not serious, though,' Kathy said quickly, half asking.

Terry shrugged. 'You know how they build spaceships these days. They're full of spare parts. If he can't fix it, they'll toss it out the window and no one will notice the difference.'

Kathy laughed. She reached over and touched his arm. 'Thanks again for getting me a badge to go inside the control area. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have been able to send Gary a message.'

Terry had no problem with assisting Gary with his love life, as long as Gary didn't start asking what Lauren liked in bed. It was not that he felt jealous of Gary; it was just that he looked like a saltless pretzel when he stood next to Gary. Fortunately, Gary was something of an overgrown boy, and Lauren had reassured him that guys like that were only good for multiple orgasms and nothing else. Terry was pretty sure she had been kidding.

'Have you seen Lorraine today?' he asked. He already knew the story about the crazy sister. He hoped he had a chance to meet with Lorraine personally to gather material for a

future book. When Gary had awakened, he had arranged for Kathy to pick up an ID badge at Mission Control so that they could exchange personal tapes. Unfortunately Lorraine had arrived first and claimed the badge. Apparently, when she wanted to, she could talk exactly like Kathy. She had already sneaked into Mission Control and sent a message to Gary, which drove him nuts. It quickly became clear to him that Lorraine couldn't be stopped unless security was alerted to her presence. Yet if that happened, the papers would get hold of the story and tell the whole world about Lorraine. With that in mind, both Gary and Lauren had sent Terry a message explaining the situation and asking for his help. That was how Terry had come to meet Kathy Johnson. It had been a snap for

him to get Kathy another badge. But getting the first one back was turning into a problem.

Kathy moaned. 'No, I haven't seen her. I have no idea where she is.'

'Has Lorraine always been like this?'

'She's been saying crazy things since she learned to talk.' Kathy changed the subject. 'When Gary was in California, he told me that Lauren had raised a younger sister all by herself.'

Terry nodded. 'That's Jenny.'

'How old is she?'

'Nineteen years younger than Lauren. Thirteen.'

'Where is she?' Kathy asked.

'She's staying in Wyoming. I own a cabin there.'

'Does she have family there?'

'No. As far as family is concerned, Lauren and Jenny have only each other. But Jenny's staying with people I've known for years. Which reminds me - I should call Jenny now. Would you excuse me for a moment?'

'Sure. I'll get us more coffee. Our waitress looks glued to the screen.'

Terry stood. 'Yeah. The more you look at that place, the harder it is to look away.'

Terry went to an empty booth at the rear of the crowded shop and sat down before the video phone. A few buttons pushed and Jennifer appeared on the screen. She had a fire going. The TV set was off. She smiled faintly when she saw who it was.

'Terry,' she said. 'I knew it would be you.'

'I've been trying to reach you. What are you up to? Still working on your story?'

Jennifer nodded. 'I'm using the typewriter you got me. It's the best present I've ever received. What have you been doing?'

Terry felt disappointed. 'Don't you know Lauren has landed on Mars? Haven't you had the TV on?'

'I know she's there.'

'Aren't you excited? Aren't you proud of her?'

'I've always been proud of Lauren,' she said softly.

'She's been asking about you.'

'I know. I'll turn on the TV.'

'Good. I wish you were here.'

She shook her head sadly. 'I can't come.'

'Have you been having any nightmares?'

Her eyes strayed to the fire. 'They're gone. But I stay up at night and write my story. I have to finish it. There's a way to go.'

'Is Daniel there?' Terry asked.

'He was here. But I sent him off to do things.'

I sent him off.



'Professor Ranoth was asking for you, too,' Terry said.

Jennifer brightened. 'Jim's with them?'

'Of course. You knew he was going.'

'He's with Lauren?'

'They're together on the same planet.'

Jennifer seemed to lose interest. 'It doesn't matter. Tell him hello for me. Tell him I'm still wearing the ring.'

Kathy knocked on the booth. She gestured back toward the TV. Terry understood Lauren was about to climb out of the Hawk.

'Jenny,' he said, 'I've got to go. Lauren's about to walk on the surface of Mars. It's on TV if you want to watch, on almost every channel. I'll call you later tonight, OK?'

'Fine,' Jennifer said, her voice forlorn. 'Tell Lauren I love her, and that I think about her all the time.'

'I'll do that,' he said.

## FIFTEEN

The Hawk had three levels. The top level was the control room. That was where they had sat during the landing. It was the heart of the lander. Besides containing the propulsion controls, it also housed Friend's brain and their communication system. On the second level were the personal quarters: two small bedrooms attached to a central living area. The second level was also used for storage. The bottom level they called the basement. It contained a kitchen, a bathroom, a laboratory, the airlock and the garage. The garage housed two extraordinary vehicles. One was a lightweight jeep with six-foot-tall wheels that could waltz over boulders. The other was more jet than car, a missile with four seats and a windshield attached. It had earned the nickname Hummingbird. Hummingbird floated and accelerated on an invisible jet cushion, and would be especially valuable when they explored around Olympus Mons, in the mountainous Tharsis region.

For all its three levels, the Hawk was a tight squeeze. Lauren was anxious to get outside and stretch. At present she was in the basement, checking her pressure suit for the third time. Jessica worked an arm's reach away, preparing a soil sample for incubation to see if it contained organic compounds. Gary was in the basement, too, lying under a

massive insulated coil and repairing a generator that had been damaged in the landing. He was fuming to go outside, and was mad at Bill for making him repair the generator first. Lauren stepped on his toes as she climbed into the airlock.

'Watch out for the natives, Doc,' he called.

'Gotcha,' Lauren said. A door rifled shut behind her. Fans sucked the atmosphere away. When she returned inside she would be blasted with scalding steam and rinsed with disinfectant. They were infinitely cautious of an infection. An alien breed of germs, totally foreign to their bodies' defenses, could wipe them out as surely as giant insect monsters. Such an infection could wipe out the entire world if they brought it home with them.

The external door of the airlock finally opened, and Lauren was face to face with Mars. She could have been on a Hollywood set. There were cameras pointed at her, and the rusty landscape and pink sky looked like one giant prop. There were rocks everywhere.

Lauren remembered that billions on Earth were watching. She started down the ladder, praying she didn't look like a klutz, and worrying what her first words should be. Bill had stepped onto Mars and walked around for two minutes before saying a word. Jim had made a remark about opening a real estate office. Lauren paused on the last rung of the ladder, still thinking.

God. Destiny. The stars. The future. Evolution.

Finally she gave up and hopped off the ladder and said the first thing that came to her 'This place is better than Disneyland!'

Gary snickered inside her helmet. Because the Martian atmosphere was extremely thin, normal conversation was impossible. However, scientists had devised acoustical

sensors that could pick up faint sound waves and boost them a hundredfold. With these instruments attached to the outside of their helmets - they were called vocals - they could talk to each other without the aid of radio. They could even hear the wind rising, and rocks falling, and monsters approaching. Lauren opened her vocals now and grabbed the cellophane-wrapped American flag that stood at the foot of the ladder. Bill had put it there and it was a stupid place; they would fry the flag when they fired their rockets at take off. Flag in hand, she bounced towards Jim, enjoying the gentle gravity. Jim had half buried himself in a hole he was digging.

'Are you off line?' Lauren asked.

'Yes,' Jim said.

'Seen any monsters?'

'No.'

'Tired?' she asked.

'A bit.' He killed his pneumatic drill and tried to wipe the perspiration from his brow. Then he laughed. 'Is there no way to get the sweat out of your eyes?'

'There is. Take a break. Doctor's orders. Here, I'll give you a hand.' She pulled him out of the hole without effort. 'Find anything interesting?'

'A couple of humanoid skeletons. The usual.'

'Want to help me replant the flag?' Lauren asked.

'Where?'

Lauren pointed. 'On that rise. The camera is facing that way.'

As they scaled the shallow hill, Lauren noted how hard and brittle the ground was beneath the thin layer of covering dust, as if the surface had been baked in an enormous oven. Jim had a hammer with him, but pounding the flagpole into the ground took them several minutes.

'Stay there,' Jim said. He backed away and raised his camera.

'Should I salute?' Lauren asked.

Jim crouched down. 'Only if you're feeling patriotic'

Lauren gave an exaggerated salute and said, 'I claim this world for all the future generations of mankind.'

The flag toppled the instant Jim snapped the picture. Brushing the red sand from the stars and stripes, Lauren wondered if she had said the wrong thing.

In the corner of the basement that was their kitchen, Jessica helped Lauren fix hot chocolate for the men. Six hours had passed since Lauren's excursion, and the sun was two hours below the horizon. Outside the weather was lousy - seventy below - but that was the trouble with showing up during a million-year ice age. Bill was in the control room reporting to Houston on the progress of their mission. Jim and Gary were just up the ladder, in the living area. Gary was reading *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury and trying to defend himself against Friend's emotionless criticism of the repair job he had done on the generator. Jim was studying soil samples. Now he asked if he could have a cup of coffee instead of hot chocolate.

'But Lauren,' he said, from the level above. 'I've been awake a week. The caffeine won't shock my system. Oreos don't taste good without coffee. Plus I hate hot chocolate.'

'NASA wouldn't have given us the coffee,' Gary added, 'if we weren't supposed to drink it.'

'Jim smuggled it aboard,' Lauren called.

'God wouldn't have given us coffee,' Jim said, 'if it wasn't good for us.'

'What about Oreo cookies?' Lauren asked. 'God didn't give us Oreo cookies. All that junk is just junk. I won't have you getting sick.'

'It satisfies the soul,' Jim said. 'Man does not live by vitamin complexes and protein powders alone. I can't work without my cup of coffee.'

Lauren looked at Jessica, saying, 'All he eats is sweets. I should never have let him bring those cookies aboard the Hawk. We have strict menus that we're supposed to follow.'

'What about the chocolate in the hot chocolate?' Jessica asked. 'Doesn't it have caffeine in it?'

Lauren lowered her voice. 'It's really carob.'

Jessica laughed. 'My grandpapa used to drink twenty cups of coffee every day. He took it scalding hot, with a tablespoon of sugar. He lived to be ninety-seven.'

'A great and wise man, no doubt,' Jim said.

'You are not helping me,' Lauren complained to Jessica.

Jessica leaned over and whispered in her ear. 'Make Jim his coffee. He'll just sneak down here in the middle of the night and drink it, anyway. Then he won't be able to sleep.'

'I heard cookies dilute the effect of caffeine,' Jim said.

Lauren snorted. 'Now we know what killed the Russians. They landed on Mars and ate all their desserts at once in celebration and died of hypoglycemia.' She opened the lid on Jim's instant coffee jar. She'd had it out anyway. She put one - just one - teaspoon into a cup and added boiling water.

'Make it strong,' Jim called.

Lauren put in another teaspoon.

'I want some, too,' Gary said. 'I hate hot chocolate. It gives me pimples.'

Lauren scowled and tossed Gary's hot chocolate down the disposal chute. While she fixed another cup of coffee, Jessica began to sniff the air like a bloodhound.

'My, that smells good,' Jessica said, and sighed. 'When I was a little girl, my mom used to make a fresh pot of coffee

every morning. It would take the chill right out of your bones.'

'Jesus Mars Christ,' Lauren muttered.

Later, they gathered in the living area, each with a cup of strong coffee in hand, including Lauren. She sat next to a porthole, searching the bleak western horizon for signs of Phobos, the larger of Mars's two moons. It was supposed to rise shortly.

Gary had reached over on the couch and poked her in the side with his big toe.

'Don't do that!' she snapped.

He set his book face down on his chest and asked, 'Is it up yet?'

'You should know,' she said.

'What?' Gary asked.

'I haven't seen it,' Lauren said. She turned away from the window and removed the foot Gary had generously dropped in her lap. 'I must be looking in the wrong part of the sky.'

'Watch southwest,' Jim said, bent over a picture of a rock he'd photographed earlier under a microscope. 'Phobos comes up fast.'

'Have you made any discoveries with the samples we collected today, Professor?' Bill asked Jim. Jessica sat beside her husband on the other couch, brushing her hair.

Jim put an Oreo cookie in his mouth and took a sip of his coffee. 'No discoveries,' he said, chewing. 'Just greater confirmation and refinement of the theories we have been forming about Mars since the Viking series. There was water here once. Not too recently, but not that long ago, either. I'd say between one and two million years ago.'

'Explain,' Bill said.



'The planet's river beds were carved by water,' Jim said. 'Mars may be a volcanic planet, but no lava, no matter how

thin and runny, could have cut the ravines we have here. Of course, that's not news. Since the Vikings everybody's figured that Mars possessed surface water at one time. When that time was has always been the question. After studying these rocks and this soil, I feel the effects of erosion on Mars have been severely underestimated. The air here is thin, but we've already recorded winds as high as fifty miles an hour, far higher than we anticipated, and plenty high enough to make dust airborne. Do you all see my point? The ravines I studied today are relatively sharp edged. They couldn't have been subject to erosion for too long. That means the water that dug the ravines must have been here as recently as a couple of million years ago. I'd say there was still water here when the human race was getting started.'

'You're saying there were canals here, then?' Lauren asked, poking fun at him.

Jim smiled. 'If you want to call them that.'

Lauren reminded herself why water could not exist in the liquid phase on Mars. In the thin atmosphere, it would immediately vaporize or freeze. It snowed on Mars, but it never rained.

'But Jim,' Lauren said, 'that means the atmosphere was at least ten times thicker then. What could have blown it away?'

Jim pulled the two halves of another Oreo apart and began to lick the icing. 'I wonder,' he said.

'What if Mars came into conjunction with the Sun?' Bill said. 'When the axis of the planet was tilted at such an angle that both poles were facing the sun at a relatively similar angle. In such a case, the layer of frozen carbon dioxide that covers the ice water at the

poles could evaporate. That would cause the atmosphere to undergo a considerable rise in density. Is that not possible, Professor?

Jim nodded. 'Possible. However, I've always favored intense volcanic activity filling the atmosphere with dust and causing the greenhouse effect, and in turn raising the temperature. No conjunction to the sun would melt the ice water at the poles. Only the carbon dioxide would melt.'

'But those are theories on how the atmosphere could become dense,' Lauren said. 'How did Mars lose its air in the first place?'

Jim shrugged. 'Some cosmic catastrophe perhaps.'

[Message from Houston.]

'What classification?' Bill asked.

[Class F, Bill.]

That meant it was from a friend or relative. Lauren hoped it was Jennifer, and that she had finally joined Terry in Houston. Lauren worried about her, even though she was sure Daniel's family were fine people. Lauren worried about cosmic catastrophes.

'Who is it?' Lauren asked.

[Kathy Johnson, Lauren.]

Gary howled. 'My woman.'

'Use my screen,' Jim said. He erased the photo of his Martian rock. 'I'm through for the night.'

'Great,' Gary said, getting up quickly. 'On screen six Friend.'

[Yes, Gary.]

Kathy came on the screen, cute as ever, and started talking to a stoned, smiling Gary. Lauren continued her search out the porthole for Phobos, and pretended not to listen. Suddenly Gary howled again, this time in irritation.

'Damnit,' Gary said, his face crumpling. 'It's Lorraine.' He slapped his knee. 'She had me fooled for a minute. She was talking like Kathy. But listen to her now!'

'It was very hairy,' Lorraine was saying. 'I didn't know what to do. I've never seen a loaded cannon with

ammunition like that. He tried to pin me, and I tried to squirm away. But Gary, I'm sorry, I guess I just didn't try hard enough. He had me greased. Somehow he slipped inside. Do you forgive me?'

Lauren would have thought no one could laugh harder than she was laughing if Jessica hadn't been in the same room with her. The two of them doubled up and fell off their respective couches. Jim's cheeks looked as if they were ready to burst; he was trying to restrain himself. Bill was another matter. In a ridiculously even tone, he said, 'If you don't want to listen to the young lady, Major, have Friend break the connection.'

'Turn that bitch off, Friend!' Gary shouted.

[Which bitch is that, Gary?]

Gary pointed at Lorraine. 'Her!'

[You mean the young lady on screen six, Gary?]

'Yes!'

[I apologize for the delay, Gary. I did not know the young lady was a female animal or a vicious or immoral woman, and could thus be classified as a bitch.]

The screen went blank. But they weren't through yet.

'The rest of you shut up!' Gary yelled, turning red.

'Oh, my!' Lauren gasped from her place on the floor, clutching her sides.' "He had me greased"!'

' "I'd never seen a cannon loaded with ammunition like that"! ' Jessica cried, choking on her laughter. 'Oh, Gary! You sure know how to pick them!'

Gary appealed to Jim. 'Would you tell these tramps that this is no laughing matter?'

Jim started to speak. But then he slapped his leg and burst into giggles. Lauren threw a cushion and hit Gary in the head. Even Bill began to chuckle. Finally, in the end, Gary began to laugh with them.

T could have sworn it was Kathy at first,' Gary said, when

they began to sober up. 'Hey, Friend. Put the bitch back on. But leave the audio off. I can look at her and pretend she's Kathy.'

[Yes, Gary. The bitch on screen six.]

'No, look at this,' Lauren exclaimed, jumping back to the porthole. A dull elongated light outside the portal had caught her eye. It was rising too fast to be a star, and it was too big. The group gathered at her back and stared out into the night, where the temperature would have killed them in a minute without protection. Phobos inched steadily into the sky, and it seemed to Lauren a good omen that the moon appeared just at the end of their laughter.

Yet the night deepened, a night as long as Earth's, but darker and more silent. More empty.

Lauren awoke from a troubled sleep to find her arms moving in the air above her head. She'd been having a nightmare, and had been trying to push something away. Quickly she brought her arms back to her sides and glanced to the other bed where Jessica lay snoring peacefully. Try as she might, Lauren could not remember any other details from her nightmare, except that something heaving and repulsive had been trying to climb on top of her, and that it had been smothering her.

Lauren sat up and swallowed, wondering at the foul taste in her mouth. It was as if she had eaten spoiled meat for dinner. She considered going down to the basement for a glass of water. She felt dry.

Instead, she got up and crossed to the porthole. The alien darkness drew her, although she couldn't see a thing. She looked for a few seconds and then climbed back into bed. A few minutes later, though, she was at the porthole again, watching and waiting. Still, there was nothing there. She leaned her nose against the glass. The chill of the contact

made her whole body shiver. She felt suddenly alone, terribly alone.

'Jenny,' she whispered. 'Jenny.'

In time Lauren returned to her bed and fell asleep.

The footprints that had crossed in front of the Rover were gone. But the Rover's high-gain antenna had been snapped off its extension arm. It hung like a broken arm as they drove up to the probe in their jeep.

Lauren fingered the trigger on her laser rifle. Two miles in the distance she could see the Hawk, sleek and sharp in the afternoon sun. Bill and Jim climbed out of the jeep and stood nearby. Lauren had a headache. She'd slept very badly.

'Where do you think they went?' she asked.

Jim walked over in front of the Rover and knelt where the footprints had been photographed years before. 'I think a Martian brushed them away,' he said.

'Seriously,' Lauren said.

'The wind. I told you it's been much stronger than we anticipated.'

'You think it's the wind that made the prints, don't you?' Lauren climbed down from the jeep, still holding the laser.

Jim smiled. 'Remember, I'm the one who saw canals.'

'What are your plans, Professor?' Bill asked.

Jim kicked the sand at his feet. It was primarily composed of hydrate ferric oxide. Indeed, the planet's once respectable water and oxygen supply - if they listened to Jim - was not chemically bound in the soil.

'I would like to brush away the dust in the area where the footprints were photographed,' Jim said. 'If there are holes where the prints used to be, then we can be fairly certain they were created by the wind.'

'Do you wish to start on that today?' Bill asked.

'It could take me more than a day. But, yes, we may as well get going on it.'

'What equipment will you need?' Bill asked.

'The same equipment I was using to dig yesterday. It's back at the Hawk.'

'I was thinking that you should install the seismometer first,' Bill said.

'Fine,' Jim said. 'This can wait. We should stick to our program. But while we are here, I want the Rover photographed from every direction at a distance of fifty feet. I also want to examine the Rover itself.'

'Very well, Professor,' Bill said, removing a camera from the front seat of the jeep. 'I'll take the pictures.' He walked off.

'Come, Lauren,' Jim said. 'Let's inspect this 'nineties masterpiece.'

The Rover had been driving straight for a low hill when it stopped. Its oversized wheels appeared unharmed, and the ground immediately in front of it was as close to uncluttered as Mars got. Its cameras were filthy with dust. Still, it was the snapped antenna that held their attention.

'Well, did a monster do this or not?' Lauren asked.

Jim tugged unsuccessfully on the snapped arm, trying to break it free. 'I don't know,' he said.

'What about the wind?'

'It should be too thin to snap metal like this,' Jim said.

Lauren shifted the laser rifle's strap on her shoulder. She noticed they were in the patch of Bill's picture-taking. 'Let's move to the side,' she said, gesturing. 'I always feel self-conscious in front of a camera.'



'Why do you say that?' Jim asked, his voice oddly alert.

'We're in the way. You said you wanted the Rover photographed from every angle.'

'No, Lauren. Why did you say you felt self-conscious in

front of a camera? I've seen you on TV. You could be an actress.'

The question caught her off guard. She had been looking back over her shoulder. She had done the same often during the entire drive to the Rover. It was fine to keep an eye out, but she realized she was being paranoid. Yet she felt suddenly defensive about her actions.

'It's natural to feel you're being watched when you're in front of a camera,' she said.

'Watched? Do you feel like you're being watched?'

'I didn't say that,' Lauren said.

'Did you have a good night's sleep?'

'No. Why do you ask? Did you?'

'I slept horribly,' Jim said.

Lauren shook her head. 'I can't place you, Jim. You weren't excited about the footprints. You don't think a monster snapped the antenna. Yet you're worried about being watched. Or you're worried that I feel like I'm being watched. Now tell me, yes or no, do you think this planet's dead?'

Jim grabbed a handful of dust that had settled atop the Rover's temperature sensor and squeezed it in his gloved hand. 'Yes. I've never been in a place that felt so dead. We'll continue our exploration and our experiments, but there's no life here.'

'Then what are you getting at?'

Jim tossed the dust in the air. Rather than falling straight down, it trailed slightly to the west. 'I'm anxious to visit the spot where the Russians landed. We might find some answers there. But you see this dust? It's scattering. The wind is coming up. We should be careful about the wind.' He pulled once more on the broken antenna arm, and it dropped to the ground. 'Even a dead planet could kill us.'

Later, they drove back to the Hawk in silence.

That night, Lauren helped Jessica with experiments on the soil. They were performing three types. The first was designed to test for both plant and animal life. It relied on the fact that if you gave an animal or plant something to eat, it sooner or later gave off gas. Here they were talking about microscopic plants and animals hidden in the dirt. They fed the dirt a special broth, and were at first excited when it gave off substantial amounts of carbon dioxide. Unfortunately the amount quickly diminished, and then disappeared altogether, which shouldn't have happened if there was life in the soil; it should have been busy reproducing.

The second experiment also gave confusing results. It was designed specifically to test for plant life. On Earth, all plants took in sunlight and carbon dioxide. Would the soil sample absorb carbon dioxide when exposed to it? The answer was yes, and for a while they were excited again. But then soil continued to absorb carbon dioxide even when it had been baked to such a high temperature that all plant life should have been destroyed.

Their third experiment was the simplest, of all, and gave them perhaps the most information. They baked lumps of Martian soil and analyzed what gases were given off. All organic material gave off an aroma when it was heated. Yet the Martian soil didn't smell at all. It was dead. It was beginning to look more and more as though Jim was right, as were most scientists on Earth who had never seen the Rover's pictures.

It made sense to Lauren. Mars had no ozone layer to protect it from the sun's ultraviolet. Consequently, the soil should be sterile. However, Jessica seemed uncertain that ultraviolet bombardment alone could account for the experimental results. Jessica said there were still plenty of

signs that there had been life on Mars long ago. There just weren't any bodies left behind.

Lauren removed her hands from the gloves attached to the inside of the Hawk's incubator and washed up while Jessica entered the bathroom to take a shower. Lauren was on the verge of leaving the basement when she became aware of the dust blasting the Hawk's hull. It sounded eerie in a world where nothing was supposed to have changed much in a million years.

It sounds like an invisible monster.

Lauren climbed the ladder out of the basement.

Gary was alone in the living area, sprawled on the couch with a book in his hands, the science fiction classic *Dune*.

'What happened to Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*?' she asked.

'I put it away,' Gary said.

'Why?'

'At the beginning of the book they talk about the first few expeditions to Mars. It was depressing me.'

'Why? I mean, what happened to them?'

'In which expedition?' Gary asked.

'Oh. The first one?'

Gary rested Dune on his chest and looked at her with tired eyes. She couldn't remember him having smiled all day. 'A Martian murdered them when they landed,' he said.

'I see.' It was only a story. 'How about the second expedition?'

'The same. But first the humans were mistaken by a Martian for insane Martians. Eventually they were all killed, though.'

'What about the third expedition?'

Gary reached for his book and continued reading. 'You don't want to hear about it.'

'Was it bad?' Lauren asked.

'Yes.'

'Like the first two?'

'Worse.'

'I never knew it was a gloomy book,' Lauren said.

'Dune's not much better. They have sandstorms in Dune. Storms like we're having now.'

Lauren wanted to change the subject. 'Where's Jim? Has he gone to bed?'

Gary nodded. 'He told me he was exhausted.'

Lauren made a mental note to examine him in the morning. 'Keep an eye on him, Gary. Make sure he doesn't overwork himself. Everything we do revolves around him.'

'Sure.'

Lauren yawned. 'I'm tired myself. I think I'll hit the sack. Is Bill talking to Houston?'

'Yeah,' Gary mumbled, preoccupied. The United States had spent billions for them to come to this forsaken place, and he spent his time reading fiction.

'I kind of wanted to talk to Jim before I went to bed,' she said, mostly to herself. 'Gary? Did he say what the wind was up to before he lay down?'

'Seventy-nine miles an hour.'

'Is that dangerous?'

'If it gets any higher, yes.'

'What would we do then?'

'Leave,' Gary said.

The word had a nice ring to it. 'I have to admit I kind of miss old Earth already.'

Gary turned a page in his book. 'If we leave here, we just go to where the Russians landed. We just go there.'

'Oh. Yeah. I hadn't forgotten.'

Strong hands gripped her neck, choking off her air. She

needed to scream but she couldn't breathe. They were smothering her!

'Don't touch me!' she finally managed to cry, bolting upright in bed. The relief was instantaneous. She had been asleep. Now she was awake. She was safe. Gary was sitting on her bed. Jim stood at his back.

'What is it?' she asked, dazed.

'I didn't mean to wake you so roughly,' Gary said.

Lauren noticed it was still dark. They had not turned on the light. Jessica was no longer in her bed. 'Why are you two up?'

'Listen,' Jim said.

Lauren couldn't believe she hadn't noticed the sound at first. Whatever she had been dreaming about had muddled her whole brain. It sounded as if the Hawk was getting sandblasted in preparation for a new coat of paint.

'How bad is it?' she asked.

'The sand has stripped away our exterior paint,' Jim said. 'Our communications are filled with static. I can't even measure the speed of the wind. We have to get out of here.'

'Can you do it, Gary?' she asked.

Gary stood, and paced uneasily in the cramped quarters. 'Not if it gets any worse. I would prefer to wait until it dies down, but Bill is worried that dust may filter into our engines. I see his point. If that happens, we'll never get out of here.'

'But can we blast off in this wind?' she asked. 'Won't we wobble?'

'Wobble?' Gary said. 'We'll have our guts twisted inside out.' He stepped to the door. 'I've got to start my checks.' He left.

Wearing only her underwear and her oversized Houston Oiler jersey, Lauren got up and followed Jim to the porthole. 'Where's Jessie?' she asked.

'Upstairs with Bill. He's trying to consult with Houston. He's not having much luck.' Jim checked his watch. 'Two hours before sunrise. Are you fully awake, Lauren? Gary had to shake you hard before you opened your eyes.'

'We Wagners are funny sleepers,' Lauren said, thinking of Jennifer. She pointed out the porthole. 'What about our equipment?'

'We have the jeep and Hummingbird aboard. The rest will have to fend for itself.' Jim shook his head. 'It's incredible, this storm. The Rover didn't detect winds one-fifth this magnitude.'

'How will the Tharsis region be?' Lauren asked.

'It's mountainous, it should be fairly well-sheltered. Of course, we won't know how extensive the storm is until we're in space and looking down.' Jim pressed his face against the porthole. 'It's gone.'



'What?' Lauren asked.

'Our flag. Mars buried it.'

'Maybe the planet's trying to give us a hint to get out of here while the going's good.'

'Maybe,' Jim said softly. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. 'Or maybe it's trying to trick us into going somewhere else.'

## BOOKTHREE The Fire

### SIXTEEN

#### Excerpts from Jennifer Wagner's Story

The Sastra were losing. Six days they had battled the Asurians on the open desert, and already half their people were dead. Now the enemy was pushing into the mountains, from where they would be in position to sweep into the Garden and destroy them all. The Sastra were being overwhelmed by sheer numbers, and by a numbing poison the Asurians inflicted through rains of piercing darts. Of the children that still survived, many had been wounded, and carried back to the Garden, where Chaneen tended them with the powers of her mysterious touch. Dread weighed heavily upon her heart. She knew it would not be much longer before Kratine himself came forth and led his army to final victory.

Chaneen knelt by the body of a fallen warrior, her sister Janier standing silently at her back. During the first days of battle, they had cared for the wounded within the palace. But now there were too many. This man had been laid in a nearby meadow. He was unconscious, and his flesh burned with fever. He had a deep gash in his neck, where the Asurians were known to bite. His hastily wrapped bandage was soaked with blood. Worse, Chaneen saw that his right arm was dark and swollen. He had been struck by an

Asurian dart. At first the name of the poison had eluded Chaneen. But now she recognized it as nothing more than Asurian water. Water that brought agonizing death to her children. -

Chaneen put her right palm on the warrior's forehead and took his numb arm with her other hand. She closed her eyes, sensing the man's life ebbing away. Summoning her powers, she began to 'take on' his pain, and bring him back. But as his strength grew, her own weakness increased. Where he bled, she hurt. Her own right arm turned cold and lifeless. In her thoughts came the horror of the beast that had chewed at the man's neck, and the memory of how the Asurian, in turn, had perished from an arrow through his chest moments after attacking the man. But it was a scene Chaneen had suffered through too many times in the last few days, and she began to feel faint. Janier caught her in strong arms as she slipped to the ground, and removed her hands from the warrior. Chaneen felt momentary relief. Yet she resisted Janier's help.

'Do not stop me, Janier,' she said. 'He is near death. I must hold him, and bring him back to us.'

Her sister gave her no heed and moved her further away. 'You are weary, Chaneen. You must rest. It is too late for this man, anyway. He will surely die.'

Chaneen nodded weakly. 'But I must help him, if only to ease his pains.'

'Rest first, for a few moments.'

Chaneen sighed and looked to the west. The sky was filled with smoke, the mountain tops invisible behind clouds of ash. The sun could hardly be found. She had sent instructions to Tier to set fire to the trees, with the hope of gaining them more time. At first, instinctively, the Asurians had retreated, and the Sastra had been given a day's respite. But seeing that it was only the fire of man, and not the wrath of the Fire Messenger, they had re-attacked in earnest. At night the mountains burned with red flame, and watching from her palace, Chaneen would be reminded of Kratine's eyes. And every morning came news that the Asurians were closer.

'Has word come from Tier today?' Chaneen asked.

'No, and I worry for him, 'Janier said. 'It is said that he always fights at the front of the battle.' She knelt by Chaneen's side. 'Would it

not be possible, my Queen, to be by his side?'

Chaneen touched the rings on her hand and wondered at the brightness of Rancar's. She was still searching for a meaning in his death. She knew there must be one. 'You wish to fight, Janier?' she asked.

I wish to be by my husband's side when the end comes.'

'But you wish to destroy those who assail us?'

'Yes. 'Janier bowed her head. 'Since seeing Rankar's finger, I have wished for nothing else.'

Chaneen thought of the reasons why she kept Janier close to her side, and then spoke some of them to her sister. 'We are of the same flesh. What power rests in me may also live in you, should I bring it to life. Still, our hearts differ. I do not desire the death of anyone, even the death of those who kill my children. It is the way I am.'

'The Sastra understand, Chaneen. We look for you to heal the scars of the war, not to fight it. None would have you touched by our enemy.'

Long Chaneen had debated allowing her sister to be the arm of the Fire Messenger's flame, recognizing herself as incapable of bringing the fire. But having only a choice between evils had caused her to hesitate. She would still be the ultimate cause of the Asurians' deaths.

Suddenly the wounded warrior opened his eyes. Chaneen moved to his side and took his hand. 'Chaneen,' he whispered. 'Help me! It's dark and cold. I'm so cold.'

'I am here,' she said. 'The cold is going, and the darkness cannot follow you. You are one of my children.'

The man gasped. 'Ami to die?'

And she had thought she was past tears. 'Yes.'

A tremor shook his body. 'I am afraid, Chaneen. Will you stay with me?'

I will always be with you. There is no end for us. We are of the light. The darkness cannot endure before us.' She kissed his numb arm, washing it with her tears. Her warrior relaxed and closed his eyes. Warmth flowed through his flesh. He smiled faintly.

'Then we will be triumphant, Chaneen?' he asked.

'Yes. There is no need to fear. In the end we will win.'

'Chaneen.' He began to cough. 'My name is...'

She put her ear to his bleeding lips. 'Yes?'

He was choking. I want you to know who I am. My name...'

He did not speak again, dying in her arms. Chaneen kissed his forehead and whispered, 'Don't worry, child, I know your name.' She sat back and closed her eyes. 'You truly wish vengeance, Janier?'

'With all my heart, 'Janier said.

Chaneen nodded. 'Come to me in the night, by the pool of waters. I will invoke the Fire Messenger. You will carry the flame I cannot wield. You will have your vengeance.'

The night was filled with filth. The stars labored through a thick smoke. The enemy was at hand. Their shouts could be heard even inside the palace.

Janier knelt by Chaneen's side while Chaneen dived deep into silence, forsaking the limits of her body. She drifted without center, in one place as much as another, hearing and seeing with her inner ears and inner eyes the music of the spheres and the deities of the worlds. Silently she invoked the presence of the Fire Messenger, and he came to her, alighting on the waters. He stood taller than the trees of her Garden, part man, part animal, radiant in her mind like an erupting volcano. Although Janier saw him not, his coming rattled the very foundations of their land.

He spoke, not with words, but with a sharing of thought. 'Chaneen of Earth, I have come at your bidding. What do you desire of me?'

Chaneen answered him in the same silent manner. 'Rankar has been stripped of his body by our ancient foe. Even now the Asurian army fights at my door. Many of my children

are dead. More are dying as we speak. I have called you forth to beg for the alliance of your strength, and for the casting of your flame.'

'Why didn't you summon me earlier, before so many of your children died?'

Chaneen hesitated. 'I fear to be the cause of death to others.'

'The Sun would support your cause.'

'So Rankar instructed.'

'Do you still fear to seek my alliance, Chaneen?'

I have called you forth to ally with my sister. It is she who now kneels by my side.'

The Fire Messenger shifted his burning ethereal form above the waters, staring down upon Janier from a great height. 'She could not absorb my form. It would destroy her.'

I know that,' Chaneen said. I will keep you here in my being, resting in the Garden, while Janier goes into battle and draws your might from me, and through me.'

'The danger would be grave, for one such as her, to possess your power, and in turn, mine.'

I am incapable of wielding your flame,' Chaneen said. 'Our only hope is in the alliance I describe. Will you do it?'

For a long time the Fire Messenger studied Janier. Finally he said, I will stay with you, Chaneen, until the last of your enemy flees your land, but no longer. Then my fire will return to the source.'

'So be it,' Chaneen said. The Fire Messenger vanished from her vision, but Chaneen now felt his special power enlivened in her own self. She opened her eyes and turned to her sister. 'Janier, I have good news. The Fire Messenger has agreed to help us. He will stay with me as long as the Asurians walk on our soil. He will only leave when they have been beaten back.' Janier's eyes were wide. 'You will bring the fire, Chaneen?'

'No. You will bring it.' Janier was confused. 'How is this possible?'

'You are the same flesh as me. Your arm can be my arm, and my arm now holds the fire. You have but to desire where the flame shall fall, and it will fall.' Janier trembled with excitement. 'Can this be so?'

'Yes.'

'We will be victorious? They won't be able to stand against me?'

Chaneen was troubled. 'It is not from you they will flee, but from the gift the gods have bestowed upon us because they feel we have been wronged. Yet there is still danger. We can still be defeated.' Chaneen paused and touched the waters with her finger. She realized now why she had waited so long to invoke the Fire Messenger. Her sister was as dear to her as Rankar. The possibility of losing them both was unthinkable. 'Listen to me, Janier. You can command the power of the immortal Fire Messenger, but you are still human. Go to Tier and our warriors, and bring the fire. But if the Asurian king should come forth to lead his army, return immediately to the Garden. Even with the fire, you are no match for Kratine.'

Janier was concerned. 'Will he come?'

I don't know. He is shrewd. I can't fathom his mind, just as Rankar was unable to. But should you succeed in driving the enemy from our land, you must make no attempt to cross over into Asure. The Fire Messenger would depart, and even I would be unable to reach you there. Do you understand?'

I will follow the wisdom of my Queen,' fanier looked to the west, to the blazing sky, and added, 'None of them shall escape me.'

Chaneen shook her head. 'You don't understand. You are to defend the Sastra, no more.' Janier bowed her head. 'I hear you, Chaneen.'

'Good. Now be close to me. I have secrets to tell you. On the second world dwells another ally of the Sastra. She is unlike the Fire Messenger, but still of great value to us. She is the guardian of that joy which comes between a man and a woman, a parent and a child, a sister and another sister - when there is love. She brings people together. She makes them happy together. But she is here at this time of parting between us. I know you cannot see her, Janier, but I do. She stands before us on the waters wearing a resplendent form. She has jewels of starlight in her eyes, and in her hair shines the moon.' Chaneen removed her own ring and slipped it on Janier's finger. 'She stands as a witness to this bond I forge between us, Janier. No matter where you go, and no matter what dangers threaten you, I will always come to...'

'Chaneen! Chaneen!' came cries from the palace halls. Pastel, her

blind minstrel, was hurrying toward them, his face distraught. The

interruption disturbed Chaneen's invocation. She watched as the



Goddess wavered on the waters and then vanished. Janier jumped to her

feet and grabbed Pastel.

'We were to be left undisturbed,' Janier said. 'Have you news from the battle? Speak!'

Pastel trembled in Janier's hands and was unable to answer. He had been blind since birth, and Chaneen had yet to discover how to cure him. Of all her children, he was the only one who was handicapped. Nevertheless, what his eyes couldn't see, his mind understood, and arranged in beautiful verse. Chaneen alone knew that Pastel sang his songs mainly for Janier, because he loved her so much.

'Be at ease,' Chaneen said. 'Your company is always welcome. Tell us of the battle.'

Pastel turned in the direction of her voice. 'The guards did not want to bring you this news, but I felt you should know it as soon as possible. Please forgive me, my Queen.' Janier shook Pastel. 'Tell us!'

'The Asurians have all but conquered the mountains,' Pastel said, trembling. 'Already those of us left inside the Garden can hear their flying darts.'

'We're not beaten yet,' Janier said.

'Yes,' Pastel moaned. 'Forgive me, Janier. Tier has fallen. He was taken on the last wave of attack.'

'Is he dead?' Janier cried.

I don't know,' Pastel said. 'He was alive when our warriors last saw him, but he was badly injured. The Asurians bound him and carried him away.' Pastel lowered his head. 'I fear he is dead.'

'You fear!' Janier shouted. She shoved Pastel to the ground and glared at Chaneen. 'Tier has fought and fallen while I stayed here with you and did nothing. I could have saved him! Why didn't you tell me of your power earlier, Chaneen?'

Chaneen slowly stood and helped Pastel to his feet. 'Do you have to

ask? Now you have your own loss to mourn. I already had my own. I was afraid to lose you along with Rankar.'

'You were afraid' Janier said, angry.

I was afraid for you.' Chaneen tried to take Janier in her arms, but her sister shook her off.

'You area coward, 'Janier said bitterly. 'You wouldn't even go forth to save your own children.'

The change in her sister was frightening. Chaneen shook her head sadly. I couldn't save them. I can't kill. The flame wouldn't come out of me for that reason. Don't hate me, Janier. I'm not the enemy. I'm your Queen, your sister.' She held out her hand. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry! I don't want your sorrow. You could have saved Tier.' Tears streamed from Janier's face and she faltered in her accusations. But then she touched the ring Chaneen had placed on her finger and she grew hard once more. She looked to the west, to the

burning mountains, and spoke in a cold voice. I must go. Stay here, Chaneen. I don't need you. I will bring the fire.'

Janier left the palace then, running as fast as her anger.

Janier!' Pastel called. He tried to follow her but tripped and fell. Chaneen helped him up once more.

'No,' Chaneen said wearily. 'Let her go.'

'But I must help her.' Pastel stood and felt his way forward, bumping into a pillar.

'You can't catch her, and you were not born to fight. Stay inside the palace until the outcome of the war is decided. Janier may yet save us, where I have been unable to.' Chaneen sat back down by the waters. 'But leave me for now, Pastel. Janier thinks she doesn't need me, but she is wrong. I must be with her in my thoughts.'

Pastel wept. 'Yes, my Queen.' He bowed and turned away. 'I will pray for her safety.'

'We will pray,' Chaneen agreed. She closed her eyes and meditated. She meditated for days. But whenever she reached for Janier in her mind, she felt waves of heat, and saw the cold eyes of Kratine mocking her.

Janier found her warriors in retreat when she arrived at the front of battle. One final valley lay between the enemy and the Garden. Janier spoke with the captains who had survived her husband, and found Pastel's information correct. Tier had been wounded and captured, but there was a possibility he was still alive.

Janier gave orders that the Sastra were to retreat to top of the last slope, and to there stand and prevent the Asurian front line from advancing. It was her purpose to allow the Asurians to fill the valley below. Her warriors did as they were told, surrendering the portion of the valley they had fought all day to hold. Thinking that the Sastra were on the run, the Asurians swarmed into the valley, and it was as if a sea of green scales swayed below Janier's feet. How she hated the sight of them!

When Janier deemed the moment was right, she raised Chaneen's ring and called upon the Fire Messenger. From seemingly nowhere, a cloud of incandescent liquid materialized above the valley. Then in a rain of death, it fell upon the screaming Asurians. Their end came swiftly. In moments everything in the valley was turned to ash. There remained not even the skeleton of a tree. On the far side of the valley, the enemy who were left alive immediately recognized what had happened. They remembered Rankar's wrath from the previous war, and turned and fled in the direction of the desert.

Janier stood above the ruin and laughed loudly. She drew her sword.

'See those murderers running in terror back to their master? They are

fools! Even he cannot save them. Come my warriors, and let us put an

end to these snakes. It is Janier who leads you now. And I bring the

fire!'

Accompanied by the remains of Tier's once great army, Janier chased after the Asurians. Yet the latter had always been quick, and now they had a great fear driving them on. It was difficult for Janier to keep up with them. Many times she invoked the Fire Messenger, and each time he responded, laying waste to the land immediately in front of her, and whoever was on that land. But the Asurians had already scattered, and

none of her bolts were as devastating as her first. And little did Janier understand the size of the enemy. She killed thousands, tens of thousands, yet thousands remained.

Two days after the turn in the battle, the Asurians poured from the mountains onto the desert, running for the bridge Kratine had opened by his magic arts, trying to escape. Again and again Janier brought the fire, catching many of the enemy, yet allowing many more to pass beyond the range of her fire.

It was at the beginning of the desert that Janier halted her troops, remembering Chaneen's warning that Kratine might come forth to lead his army. For a moment she felt uncertain. But as she scanned the horizon, she saw no sign of the Asurian King, only signs of victory. Once more she called upon the Fire Messenger, melting the few unfortunate beasts that struggled behind their comrades. The sun was bright in the sky. Her power felt unwavering. Urging her warriors forward, she resolved to allow none to escape.

Another two days passed. Finally Janier reached the bridge that led to Asure. The sand before it was burned black from her bolts of flame. The bridge appeared to her eyes as a span of impenetrable shadow, stretching across a bottomless gorge. Her endurance and the strength of her warriors had not wavered with the great distance they had come, and now behind them lay the ashes of the bulk of the enemy. Still, she knew many Asurians had crossed over the bridge. She thought of how those that had escaped would breed once more, and form yet another army. She also thought of Tier, possibly alive on the other side of the bridge.

Janier summoned her people and stepped boldly onto the bridge. However, there she hesitated once more, filled with sudden doubt. She was no fool. Why had Kratine left the bridge open, she asked herself? She was wary of a trick. Plus she had not forgotten what Chaneen had said about how the Fire Messenger would depart if she left her own land.

Janier studied her warriors, trying to come to a decision. Those who had survived this long were the strongest, she knew, a brave people. They were not like Chaneen.

Janier still could not understand how her sister, with the power to save them all, had stayed hidden in the Garden and allowed so many to die. Chaneen may have been wise,

Janier thought, but she was also a coward. She was not like Rankar, or Tier, or herself. And what did it matter if Chaneen was right and the Fire Messenger did desert her when she crossed over into Asure? Janier had been a fighter long before the Fire Messenger came into her arm, and her warriors were brave, and their swords were sharp. There couldn't be much left of the Asurian army, she thought. They would fall easily, and perhaps afterward she would be able to rescue her husband.

'See their foolishness!' Janier called, standing upon the threshold of Asure. 'They were so afraid of us that they forgot to take down their bridge. 'She stepped forward. 'Come, let us put a final end to Asure and its people.'

Janier and her warriors crossed over the bridge.

Sitting alone by the waters of her palace, Chaneen slumped to the ground. She felt the Fire Messenger leave, and the bond between her and Janier break.

## SEVENTEEN

The Gorbachev looked dead.

Mars was waning. Against the backdrop of the darkening globe, the Russian ship shimmered like a spot of mercury deposited on bloody canvas. It was two miles away and drifting without weight-bestowing spin. That meant Carl Bensk had no up or down, and that Was a bad sign.

Lauren floated inside the Nova's main airlock with Gary. Jim was over at the Gorbachev and trying to get inside the locked front hatch. He had been there four hours; a long time in a space suit. Jim thought the lock on the Gorbachev's airlock might be broken. Bill believed the Russians had given them the wrong code. "Bill also suspected that the Gorbachev was booby-trapped. That is why the Gorbachev was two miles from the Nova and not two hundred feet.

'I wish we could help Jim somehow,' Lauren said.

'If Jim can't trip that lock, nobody can,' Gary said. 'I just hope the damn thing doesn't blow up.'

'You don't think Bill's right, do you?' Lauren asked. Cooperation between the U.S. and Russia was at an all-time high. Missiles were down, visas were up - Lauren didn't see why so many people still saw Russia as an enemy. It annoyed her.

'No, I wasn't being serious,' Gary said. 'Bill's just

paranoid. That's what makes the military mind. Don't worry, Lori.'

From a speaker in the corner of their airlock, Jim said, 'Now I know how Gandalf felt at the gates of Moria.'

'Who?' Lauren said.

'The wizard in The Lord of the Rings, I Gary said matter-of-factly.

'Have you made any progress, Professor?' Bill asked from the Nova's control room.

'I've figured out what kind of lock this is.' Jim chuckled. 'A Timetrex - they're made in the U.S. Imagine that. Give me another few minutes, Bill. I think I'm onto something.'

'How much air do you have left?' Commander Brent asked.

'An hour.'

There was a pause. Lauren could imagine Bill closing his eyes as he often did when considering. Finally she heard him say, 'If you have not penetrated the lock within twenty minutes, retreat into space a few yards, set your laser on low power, and melt the lock away.'

'Drastic measures,' Lauren muttered.

Gary nodded. 'The military mind.'

Jim mastered the forbidden gates ten minutes later. When the president had scribbled down the secret code, Jim said, he had made one of his two's look like a three. Jim thought it was funny.

Lauren and Gary put on their helmets and bled the air from the Nova's airlock. The door in front of them rifled open. Following Gary's lead, and an aura of ice crystals that twinkled about both their heads, Lauren pulled herself outside and gently shoved off the side of the Nova. Once clear of the ship and pointed in the direction of the Gorbachev, they fired the miniature jets of their jetpacks, which attached to them like a fold-out chair roped around

their ribs. The acceleration was brief and when it was complete, Lauren had no sensation of motion. Yet quickly the Nova shrank as the Gorbachev grew. Lauren felt a sudden rush of power. She was like an angel who could move from star to star, she thought. Why, she could blot out the entire planet below just by raising her hand.



But then Lauren remembered yesterday, when they had been forced to leave Mars before their time. They had in fact almost died at lift-off. Her illusion of grandeur crumbled. Perhaps another power commanded this red world, and perhaps its reach stretched as far as the Gorbachev. It was an unusual idea for Lauren to have. Then again, it was unusual for her to be falling through black space with no ship around her. Fear, faint but very real, touched her mind.

The Gorbachev drifted into the shadow of Mars, almost vanishing. She and Gary began to brake. They had to circumvent the massive Russian cylinder to find Jim. He stood in a black and silent airlock on the far side. A faint blue light shone inside his helmet. He was grinning.

'I always enjoy breaking into places,' Jim said.

'How did you think to try a two instead?' Lauren asked.

'Never forget the obvious. When Gandalf was trying to get into Moria, the eleven runes on the gate said, 'Say friend and enter.' Now Gandalf was learned in much ancient lore...'

'Oh, no!' Lauren said. 'You're beginning to sound like Gary.'

'Report!' Bill snapped from two miles away.

'We lost Lauren, but otherwise we're in good shape,' Gary said.

'How is your air, Professor?' Bill asked.

'Good for forty minutes,' Jim said.

'Gary?' Bill said.

'Yes?' Gary said.

'Stay in the airlock,' Bill said.

'What?' Gary said.

'Give your laser to Lauren and remain in the airlock,' Bill said. 'I am making a slight change in the program to minimize your personal risks.'

'For Christ's sake,' Gary said. 'I travel halfway across the goddamn solar system to see what's inside this ship, and now you tell me I can't go inside?'

'Enough, Major,' Bill said. 'Time is short. Do as I say. Begin your exploration, Professor.'

Jim pushed a series of buttons. The Gorbachev airlock door closed. The stars disappeared. Air flooded the compartment. Lauren consulted her instruments. The temperature was just a tad below freezing, the air pressure normal. The Gorbachev's life support system seemed intact. Hope kindled in Lauren's chest. Perhaps Carl Bensk was still alive, after all.

'Take this, Lori,' Gary said. He handed her his laser.

'If Carl's alive,' Jim said, 'he'll need a doctor, not a hole in his chest.'

'Take the laser, Lauren,' Bill ordered.

'Yes, sir,' Lauren said.

'Goodbye, Gary,' Jim said. 'We should be back soon. We'll keep in constant communication.'

'See that you do,' Bill said.

Gary squeezed Lauren's arm. 'Take care of yourself, Doc'

'Yes,' she said, uneasy. She would have preferred to have Gary by her side.

Lauren and Jim left Gary in the airlock and floated down a long dark tunnel towards the silent heart of the Gorbachev. Her hope that Carl was still alive began to fade quickly. All the lights were out. She gripped her flashlight

and adjusted the lamp on her helmet. She felt the way she had when, as a little girl, she had explored a giant sewer beneath the city. She had been afraid then, and she began to feel afraid now. Jim spoke in whispers, and so did she, as if they were walking past a graveyard in the middle of night. Careful, Lori, don't wake the dead.

They came to the end of the tunnel, where it split into four different shafts that led to the rim of the stationary wheel. The cosmonauts had once lived in the rim. Surrounding the black shafts were silent computer banks. They were debating which shaft to take, when Bill came in over their headsets. Concerned about Jim's diminishing air supply, he wanted to hasten their preliminary investigation. He told them to divide. Jim was to study the computer banks and try to locate Carl's last log entries, while she was to proceed

down one of the shafts and explore the living quarters. Bill told her to stay alert and not be afraid to use her weapon if anyone jumped at her. She could worry about the consequences later, he said. He must have been joking.

Alone, Lauren moved toward the rim. The Gorbachev was massive, it had four times the tonnage of the Nova. Lauren had studied its diagrams, but nothing had prepared her for the real thing. Floating down the shaft, she felt as if she were descending through a secret passageway into a pharaoh's tomb. She just hoped she didn't find any mummies.

The shaft took Lauren into what appeared to be the sleeping quarters. There were a number of beds all unmade, but no one was resting under the sheets. The floor curved away in both directions. Whichever way she chose would take her back to where she began. Or so she hoped. She decided to go to the right, and slipped through a narrow doorway. The lamp atop her helmet bobbed slowly

up and down, making her slightly dizzy. She asked Jim a question just to hear his voice. Her heartbeat was louder than his answer. But it wasn't as if she felt in any danger. There was just Jim and her inside this ship and that was it. Sure, Lori.

Lauren moved into the combination gym and sick bay. An exercise machine stood on her left. Needle packs floated in the air on her right. Using the walls, she pulled herself gently forward. The silence seemed to echo wherever she touched. Yet it wasn't as if she heard anything. That was just the point. The silence was so oppressive it seemed to speak to her. We are here, Lori. You just can't see us.

A recreation room followed. Someone had been enjoying a game of cards. They floated past her faceplate; the queen of hearts and the jack of clubs winking in the beam of her light. A sense of horrible loss tightened her throat. Original paintings hung on the walls, of places green and bright. She remembered that Commander Dmitri Maximov had been an artist. She picked up a painting of an elegant lady - his wife. Mrs Maximov would probably be sitting in front of the TV this very second waiting to hear what the brave American astronauts discovered aboard her husband's ghost ship. I'm sorry, they would have to say. There is nothing here. Nothing.

Lauren launched herself toward the next door, but her attention was still with Dmitri's work, and she pushed too hard. She hit the ceiling straight on. The shock of the collision reverberated through her whole body. The room went black. She had shattered her head lamp and dropped her flashlight. Only she didn't know that right away. All she knew was that it was black, black as a place under the ground that had been covered with cold mud. She tried to call for help and her cry gagged in her throat. She felt as if she were being smothered, and no, she wasn't afraid. Not at all. She was terrified.

Yes, Lori.

Taking slow deep breaths, Lauren tried to calm herself. By chance her hand stumbled across the flashlight, and she flipped it back on. She didn't know why it had gone off in the first place, yet she wasn't about to fight with it. The returning light was reassuring. She was reminded of a campfire Jennifer had once built when they had gone camping in the woods, in the days before they knew Terry. It was a windy night, and the trees were swaying like huge beasts. But the moment the flames burst to life under Jennifer's special care, the forest seemed friendly. Jennifer always loved a good fire.

Lauren noticed that Carl had closed all the portholes. She wondered why. The only thing outside was Mars. The sight of it must have got to him, she thought.

Lauren moved cautiously through the next door. Immediately her vision blurred. Something akin to baking flour or powdered soap had splashed onto her faceplate. She wiped it away and found that her hands were trembling. A bathroom lay open on her left. She stuck her head in and then jumped back in fright. Instantly she felt silly. She had jumped at her own reflection. Like most bathrooms, this one contained a mirror. Only this mirror was cracked, which was OK, as long as there were no Martians inside it. Yeah, right, that made sense.

Love me, Lori.

Lauren whirled, bringing her laser to bear. Someone had spoken at her back, she could have sworn they had. But her beam of light said there was no one there. She was getting

spooked, she thought. She had to relax. She tried taking deep breaths, but they just made her feel lightheaded. Shaking, she moved to enter the control room. However,

as she turned, a second glob of gook splashed her faceplate, almost cutting off her vision. Again she wiped with her hands. But this stuff did not come off easily. It was wet and sticky.

It was sticky and dark.

At the back of her mind, a warning bell went off.

'Jim!' Lauren cried in horror.

Her helmet was covered with blood.

Lauren pushed instinctively back, trying to escape. Of course the blood followed her; it was stuck to her helmet. She lost her balance and went into a spin. Her leg smacked a second floating puddle, a much larger one, and suddenly the room was filled with bloody spray. The strength went out of her. She dropped her laser, her flashlight. Voices screamed in her head. They screamed for her love.

'Help,' she moaned weakly. 'Please help me.'

She toppled in mad circles, going from no place to nowhere. Nausea swelled in her stomach as her last meal pushed up her throat. Quickly she clamped down on her guts. She knew if she vomited, she would have to pull off her helmet, and then she would have to breathe Carl's air, and drink his blood.

Finally her hand latched onto something solid, and she was able to stop her mad spin. She caught sight of her flashlight; it circled above her head like a broken siren, warning of an emergency that was two years over with. Moments later she had the light in hand. She had almost caught her breath, and was on the verge of responding to the frantic calls of her companions, when things went bad again, so bad it almost cracked her mind in two pieces.

No, no, no, Jesus. Take it away!

Hanging in space, only inches from her face, was a disembodied eye. A single eye that had been gouged from its socket. It trailed wisps of red muscle and nerves. It sported a pupil that was so dilated it could have been an open window into a hell of despair. Naturally, it was staring at her. It liked her. It floated a little closer to have a better look at her. Such a pretty girl, with such warm blood in her veins.

Lauren tried to move away, but her body was like a rubber band that had snapped, and no longer worked. She was in a dream, running from the unseen monster that was getting closer and closer. She was in the nightmare of all nightmares, where the Martians partied on goblets of red wine. A toast to Lori, they said. May her veins fill our glasses soon.

Soon, Lori.

In what was left of her mind, Lauren realized her doom was certain. The eye had seen her; it knew where to find her. Voices screamed in her headset. They spoke in Russian. They spoke of love. But she was not through for the night, oh no. There was one more ride to go on. It was sure to please.

Bad things always came from bad things. It made sense that the eye had come from somewhere. Lauren bumped into something soft and giving.

Carl Bensk was strapped tightly in his chair, his pale hands locked in a painful clench, his hollow eye sockets holes into madness. Someone had sliced open his neck with a broken

piece of mirror, revealing his carotid artery and a mess of gross tissue. The someone had undoubtedly been Carl himself. The piece of cracked mirror was still jammed in his flesh, as if death had come too swiftly for him to remove it. Yet Lauren didn't really believe that. She knew Carl's end had not come quickly, or easily. Engraved in his face were hard lines of insanity. It was as if he had witnessed a horror so unimaginable and overwhelming that even death had been unable to erase the memory.

Yes, Lori, it was bad. It was so bad it got to be good.

Carl was happy now, though. He was very happy. His obscene grin was ample testament to the secret knowledge that had come to him at the expense of his wonderful experience. But what a small expense it was. A scratched throat, a little lost blood. It was nothing to cry about, not when you didn't have any eyes. Carl wanted her to know all about it. He was willing to explain. Yes, Lori, come into my arms, and I will nibble on your ear, and whisper to you stories of love and hate. Of a sweetness so fine that your blood will boil with lust. Come Lori. Touch me. Lick me. Suck my wound. Make me come alive.

Lauren vomited, and barely caught the vomit in her mouth. She closed her eyes and tried to swallow, and block out what she was seeing. But Carl continued to watch her, with eyes that pierced through all of space and time, and left her no place to hide.

Love me, Lori. I am not evil.

## EIGHTEEN

Mission Control was an orchestra of tension. Red lights were flashing, angry people were shouting, and the stink of perspiration was as thick as in a shower room after a Super Bowl. Just outside the main room, Terry paced nervously. Lauren was supposed to land on Mars for the second time in two minutes. But there was a problem. On account of the thick clouds wrapping Olympus Mons, Gary had overshot their destination, which just happened to be the only plateau around for two hundred miles. At present they were backtracking, consuming valuable fuel. Commander Brent was screaming at Gary to set down. But Gary couldn't find the right place.



'I don't see the Russians,' Gary said. 'Where are those Russians? Where is that damn place?'

[Horizontal vector - 80 miles per hour.]

'Friend, how long to the Russian landers?' Commander Brent asked.

[Sixty-one seconds, Bill. Fifty-nine seconds.]

'We can't do it,' Commander Brent said. 'Come in on the far side of that wall, Major.'

'No good,' Gary said. 'Too rough. We could topple. A minute more.'

[Horizontal vector - 81 miles per hour.]

'We must take the chance, Gary,' Commander Brent said. 'Go down!'

Terry closed his eyes and tried to pray, but only ended up swearing at God to help them. Only four days ago a sandstorm of unexpected fury had arisen in the Utopia Planitia region and almost buried the expedition. Then the docking with the orbiting Gorbachev had followed, which had been even more nerve-wracking, what with the cloak of secrecy NASA had thrown over it. Despite promises to the contrary, the rendezvous had not been broadcast live. Terry knew from experience that the delayed transmission the public received had been doctored. The docking had gone just fine, according to the brave astronauts. Yet their voices and that included Gary and Jim, as well as Commander Brent - sounded awfully shaken after visiting the Gorbachev. Plus they couldn't hide the fact that Carl Benski was dead. The word was that his ship had suffered an internal explosion and lost all its air. Sure, Terry thought. He had received a private taped message from

Lauren after the rendezvous and she had been white as a ghost. She hadn't said a word about Carl or the Gorbachev, only asked about Jennifer. I wish I could hear her voice, Terry. Where is she?

Jennifer did not answer the phone at his cabin. She was not at Daniel's. They said she was 'out.'

'We are caught!' Gary cried from two hundred million miles away. 'The ground's caving in! Curse this bastard planet!'

A black hand of despair squeezed down on Terry's heart, its folds tipped with sharp silver nails. He fell into a chair. The message was twenty minutes old. Lauren could be dead already.

'Full power!' Commander Brent called. 'Blast us out of here!'

'Wait!' Gary said. 'I've got to...' The radio went dead.

'What happened?' Dean Ramsey, head of NASA, shouted. 'We've lost communications,' someone said.

Like a pebble on a lake they skimmed on the Martian atmosphere, racing at three thousand miles an hour. In front loomed Olympus Mons, three times as high as Everest, its massive caldera barreling above the clouds, waiting to swallow them. It was evening. They had chosen that time because the clouds that wreathed Olympus Mons formed in the morning. But even this late in the day the clouds remained, blocking their vision. Mark had said they could sit in orbit a month and still face the clouds. They were taking a chance. They wanted to be done with their program and get the hell away from Mars. Carl had shot their morale. Even stoic Bill had seemed shocked after visiting the Gorbachev. Why had Carl committed suicide? After studying the log tapes, all Jim would say was that when a person gouged out his eyes, he was usually trying to go blind. Yes, Jim, but why?

Outside the porthole on Lauren's right, it looked as if they were going to ram the tip of Olympus Mons. However, only moments later, their aerodynamic lift decreased as their speed was reduced by building friction. They began to fall again, into whirling clouds. The mountain vanished and the Hawk shook as trillions of ice crystals splintered against her hull. Gary opened their parachute and ejected their reinstalled heat shield. They fell and fell. Finally, the ground appeared.

'Oh, no,' Gary moaned.

'Altitude, Friend?' Bill asked. He looked at Gary.

[6,052 feet, Bill.]

'What's the matter?' Lauren asked. They could have been flying over the Himalayas, only the scale was grander, the color different. Mars was usually more orange than red. Yet, to her eyes, it was looking more red all the time. She'd washed Carl's blood off her pressure suit all by herself.

'We have overshot ourselves,' Bill said.

'The cloud decreased our vertical vector far more than we anticipated,' Gary said. 'We bounced too far.' He activated the Hawk's main engines and jettisoned the parachutes.

[4,501 feet.]

'What are you going to do?' Lauren asked.

'Waste our fuel,' Bill said.

Gary shrugged. 'We can't land here. We'll have to angle back to the Russian plateau.'

'How far off are we?' Jim asked.

'Eighty miles,' Gary growled, studying the terrain below.

'Are we in danger, William?' Jessica asked.

'Extreme,' her husband said flatly.

Five minutes and many miles later, Gary said, 'I don't see the Russians. Where are those Russians? Where is that damn place?'

[Horizontal vector - 80 miles per hour.]

'Friend, how long to the Russian landers?' Bill asked.

[Sixty-one seconds, Bill. Fifty-nine seconds.]

'We can't do it,' Bill said. 'Come in on the far side of that wall, Major.'

'No good,' Gary said. 'Too rough. We could topple. A minute more.'

[Horizontal vector- 81 miles per hour.]

'We must take the chance, Gary,' Bill insisted. 'Go down.'

Their fuel gauges were sinking.

'Where for Christ's sake?' Gary asked.

'Aim for that ridge,' Bill said. 'If we do not land in twenty seconds we will be trapped here forever.'

Gary shook his head. 'Too uneven.'

[273 feet. 250 feet. 200 feet.]

'What does that matter now?' Bill asked. 'Just do it, Gary!'

[108 feet. 50 feet. 18 feet.]

They settled toward the edge of a cliff. Down. Down.

'To the right,' Bill barked.

'You said the ridge!' Gary yelled.

'To the right!' Bill said:

'We are caught!' Gary screamed. 'The ground's caving in! Curse this bastard planet!'

'Full power!' Bill shouted. 'Blast us out of here!'

'Wait!' Gary said. 'I've got to...'

Something exploded in the lower decks.

'Go up!' Bill ordered.

'I've got to straighten her!' Gary said.

Love you, Jenny, Lauren thought. She closed her eyes. A second wrenching jolt kicked her through the seat. The Hawk was skidding on her landing pads, down an icy slope, her auxiliary thrusters barely keeping them from toppling. Apparently the moment they had contacted the surface, the ground had given way. Bill wanted to use their main engines to throw them back into space. But Gary was trying to straighten the Hawk first.

Suddenly the crumbling ground slipped away, and they were falling like a huge boulder into a steep valley. Lauren's eyes popped open. Gary reacted instantly. He tilted the nose of the Hawk skyward and brought their main rockets to full power. Lauren was flattened back into her chair.

[100 feet. 200 feet. 850 feet.]

But rather than continuing their upward ascent, Gary eased up on the rockets, which allowed them to hover for a moment while he glanced out the window. For an instant, watching Gary's face, Lauren thought time could have been suspended. His expression contained so many emotions at one time: confusion, revulsion, desire. Then decision locked on his face, a certainty so sudden it could have been thrust upon him from the outside. Once again they started down. Snow whipped at their hot windows and vaporized into steam. A hard thud shook the floor of their craft, and then a soft sigh seemed to echo through the control room. They were down, and the ground was firm.

[Touchdown.]

'We are down, Mark,' Bill said.

There was no response.

'Mark? Mark?' Nothing. 'Damages, Friend?' Bill asked.

[Generators A and C have failed, Bill. Communications are out. The basement is ruptured and open to the Martian environment. The laboratory is severely damaged. I am suffering minor power fluctuations.]

'Is deck two still sealed?' Bill asked.

[Yes, Bill.]

'Is our loss of communications due to the failure of the two generators?'

[Yes, Bill.]

'Why don't you go to backup?'

[I am unable to, Bill - possibly because of my own damage.]

'They'll think we exploded,' Jim said.

'I'm surprised we didn't,' Bill muttered.

Gary's face flushed inside his helmet. He exploded. 'You're the one who wanted me to set down on that foam-rubber ridge! And if I'd fired the main engines when you said, we'd have joined our Russian friends. Sir!'

Bill unfastened his belts and stood slowly, towering over Gary. 'You're right, Major,' he said casually.

'What?' Gary said.

'Your instincts chose the proper course.'

'Huh?' Gary said.



'Your hearing has not been damaged, Major.' Bill addressed them all. 'Our instruments show we have enough fuel remaining to attain a shallow orbit. But we have come here for a purpose, and thanks to Gary, we can still hope to achieve it. We will assess our damage and begin repairs. We can use the living area for an airlock until we have repressurized the basement. We are in no immediate danger. Questions? Lauren?'

'How far are we from the Russian landers?'

Bill stepped to the porthole and peered out at the snow-covered desolation. 'I saw one of them when we were coming down, but I don't see it now. How far would you say, Gary?'

'About a mile. Due north. Hey, Bill, I'm sorry for screaming at you like that.'

'I stopped listening to you long ago, Gary,' Bill said.

'Bill,' Lauren said. 'If they think we've exploded, shouldn't we repair our communications immediately?' Terry would be pulling his hair out.

'Each damage to the Hawk will be repaired in the order we see fit after an inspection,' Bill said. 'But our communications will naturally be at the top of the list.'

'Say we're unable to fix our communications,' Lauren said. 'We'll still be able to dock with the Nova, won't we?'

'Yes,' Bill said. 'It will be difficult, because Mark will now have to drop down and meet us halfway. But even without contact, it can be done. Friend will know where the Nova is at all times. Any other questions?'

There were none. They unfastened their belts and stood

and stretched in the cramped quarters, while twilight deepened outside the windows. Jim patted Lauren on the back.

'We'll be all right,' he said. 'Mark won't go off without us.'

Carl's eye winked at her. The memory would die slowly, she realized, the same way Carl had. She rubbed her own eyes, trying to shove it away. 'I just hope he doesn't cut his throat,' she said.

## NINETEEN

There was good news and there was bad news. Lauren tried to focus on the positive side. Number one, Gary and Bill had been able to patch the tear in the Hawk's hull. Number two, communications had been restored with the Nova, and consequently with Earth. Lauren had sent a message to Terry complaining of the poor working conditions. Terry had responded with a tape saying that her biography was already exciting enough, and that no new material was necessary. He had looked worse than when she had left Earth. She hoped he hadn't started drinking again.

The bad news. The puncture to the basement had sucked out a good portion of the available air inside the ship and had caused their one and only water tank to explode. Their filtration system, which allowed them to reuse their urine, had also been wiped out during the rough landing. They had only three one-gallon bottles of water, plus the small amount that was still lying in their pipes. Without water they couldn't steam-clean their suits when they came in from the outside. Without water they would be thirsty.

The morning after their second landing on Mars, Lauren searched in what was left of the laboratory for an aspirin. She didn't find one. The majority of her medical supplies lay strewn at the bottom of a mile-deep crevasse that lay but

fifty feet south of the Hawk's landing pads. Gary had cut it pretty close. Lauren had a headache, another one. She had worked hard the previous day, and then had slept poorly. In dreams Carl told her how beautiful she was. He assured her that he had a good eye for women. She had awoken with a wretched taste in her mouth.

Lauren left the basement and climbed into the living area.

'So it's definite,' Jim said as she came in. 'There's only one lander?'

'Yes,' Bill said.

'In the scopes,' Gary said, 'I can see a big hole where the other ship is supposed to be.'

'Interesting,' Jim said. He exchanged a glance with Bill.

'What is it?' Gary asked.

'Nothing, Major,' Bill said. 'Let's concentrate on the remaining Russian ship. According to Lauren, within two days our thirst will become unbearable. We will use these two days wisely. We will take the jeep to the Karamazov now.'

'Who's going?' Gary asked.

'Jim, Lauren, and myself,' Bill said. 'There will be no discussion. Gary, you will remain with Jessie and continue with the repairs. Understood?'

Gary looked disgusted. 'Yes, sir.'

'Friend,' Bill said. 'Open the garage and start the jeep.'

[Yes, Bill.]

Bill turned to Jim and Lauren. 'We will take two laser rifles with us,' he said.

Given the rough terrain that surrounded them on all sides, the plateau where they had landed was a freak of nature. Covered with pinkish-white snow, its shape was roughly oval; two miles long and half that in width. They had been

fortunate Gary was able to bring the Hawk down on the plateau. The nearby cliffs and peaks would have made the bravest of mountain climbers shudder. North, south, and west was no man's land. East stood Olympus Mons, its forty-mile-wide caldera invisible behind shifting ice clouds.

The bulbous wheels of the jeep spun briefly in the snowflakes and then caught, as Bill steered them slowly forward. Their vocals were open, and they could hear one another speak.

'It's flat here, and then it's so mountainous,' Jim mused. 'It was thoughtful of the Martians to provide us with such a nice landing strip.'

The Karamazov waited in the distance, standing twice as tall as the Hawk; a cold stake pointed at a desolate sky. It looked intact.

'What do you think of this place, Jim?' Lauren asked.

He was a long time in answering. 'It reminds me of when I hiked in the Himalayas. Yet, it's different, so alien.' He paused. 'To tell you the truth, I hate this place.'

His remark startled Lauren. 'I think we're all on edge after the last couple of days,' she said.

'Perhaps,' Jim said.

Soon the Karamazov filled their field of view. Bill parked the jeep in the shadow of the lander, and they climbed down onto the snow, huddling like insects at the base of the ship's landing pads.

'I assume you have the key to this castle?' she said to Jim. He held up a small metal box with three dangling wires.

'Gandalf couldn't have been better prepared,' he said.

A many-ranged ladder scaled halfway up the side of the Karamazov. At the steps, Bill stopped them, saying, 'I will go first. The metal may have weakened in the cold. Once I am on the platform before the airlock, you will follow, Professor. Then you, Lauren, after Jim has joined me.' Bill

turned his radio on. 'Major Wheeler?'

'Gary here, sir. How might I help you this fine day?'

Bill glanced up the ladder and then to the west, where the missing lander had once stood. 'Listen to me, Gary, and listen good,' he said seriously. 'We're in now, and we will be keeping in contact. But if for any reason you do not hear from us in the next hour, begin preparations to lift off. If after two hours, you still haven't heard from us, you will wait for the next favorable opposition with the Nova and then leave. You will not under any circumstances come looking for us. Is that understood?'

Jessica wailed in the background. Gary said with a trace of humor, 'You can't be serious.'

'I am very serious,' Bill said.

There was a lengthy pause. 'As you say, Colonel,' Gary replied.

Bill broke the connection and said, 'Release the safety on your laser, Lauren.' He stepped onto the ladder.

Fifteen minutes later the three of them were gathered on the square corrugated platform before the Karamazov's airlock. They were pretty high up; Lauren was glad she wasn't afraid of heights. There were too many other things to be afraid of on Mars. Jim attached his fancy electronic gear and labored with the door for several minutes.

'Is the seal frozen?' Bill asked finally.

Jim tried to scratch his head and then remembered his helmet. 'Possibly,' he said. 'I tripped the lock but nothing's happened.'

'Maybe we should knock,' Lauren said.

To her surprise Jim did so. To her greater surprise, the door slid open. 'Must have loosened it,' he said.

Lauren gulped. 'I hope you're right.'

They stepped into the airlock. The door automatically closed behind them. Lauren put a finger on the laser's

trigger. Fog crept up their legs as the chamber filled with air. They decreased the reception of their vocals to keep their whispers from sounding like thunder. Presently, a second door slid open, all by itself, and they stepped into a dark circular hallway, lit faintly by colored dials. They turned their helmet lamps on. Jim studied a computer board on the wall to their right, and decided it was a life-support terminal. It was still working. The atmosphere was intact, but slightly below freezing. The cold was a bad sign, and the dark; that is, if they were hoping to find survivors. Jim couldn't locate a light switch.

They passed through an open door into the center of the Karamazov, and found themselves in an elaborate laboratory. Numerous frozen blood slides lay on a counter beside an electron microscope. Lauren picked one up. It looked as if the Russian doctor had been busy, and that his work had been interrupted.

A compact elevator lifted them to the next level, a living area. Sitting on a low table was a chess game, in remission. Lauren began to perspire in her suit. Black was playing black. There was no doubt who was going to win.

The living area branched into three tiny bedrooms. One for each of them. Welcome Earthmen. Bill said they should check them out. He disappeared into the one on the left. Jim took the one in front. Lauren wanted to chase after them, and plead with him that they shouldn't separate. But she was afraid to look stupid. They would only be on the other side of the wall, for godsakes.

Yet her short meeting with Carl had taught her a thing or two about being alone. Even an instant was long enough for the hand holding the jagged sliver of mirror to reach out and lay her open like a cow on a butcher's block. Yes, her meeting with Carl had been instructional in every sense of the word. He had put things in her head she was never

going to get out. Whispered words of love. She was sure Carl would have tried to kiss her even when his blood was gushing out of his neck.

Lauren stepped quietly through the doorway that led to the right-hand bedroom. Almost immediately she let out a sigh of relief. The room was not much different than the bedrooms aboard the Nova, except that the Russians had had bunk beds. Both bunks were unmade, with the blankets piled indiscriminately on the lower bed. Best of all, the room was empty. She loved empty rooms that didn't have corpses in them.

Then Lauren noticed something odd. There seemed to be a lack of circulation in the lower sections of her suit. Cold was seeping from the floor into her legs. Quickly she consulted her suit indicators, but everything was as it should be. Then she noticed a bad smell, which should have been impossible inside her suit. The odor was both familiar and elusive at the same time. It was definitely a stink of decay, but whatever was rotting was totally foreign to her.

Lauren convinced herself she was just imagining things. She crossed to the desk and picked up a family picture. The woman was tall, of slight build, with long red hair and sad gray eyes. The children, a girl and a boy, were both dark-haired, and the man standing behind them was the commander of the Gorbachev, the first human being ever to step on another planet. She was in Dmitri Maximov's quarters, and the realization saddened her. Such a wonderful man, she thought. She sat in the chair by the desk and opened the top drawer. Inside she found a thick book. She leafed through the pages. It was Dmitri's diary, recorded in Russian, in a firm graceful hand. She decided to take it back to the Hawk and have Friend translate it.

As Lauren closed the diary and prepared to stand and leave, she caught the slightest trace of movement at the



limit of her peripheral vision. It came from the lower cot, and it made her freeze so solid she could have turned to stone. It was just her imagination running away with her, sure, she knew that. But was there just a one in a million chance there was someone under the blankets?

Come look, come peek. You know you want to, Lori.

Lauren thought of calling Jim and Bill. They were just in the other rooms. She was having trouble speaking, though; it had something to do with her dry throat. And even if she could talk, she had to wonder whether she wanted to make a fool of herself again, as she had with Carl. Of course it was another Carl she was worried about. Good old Carl. He seemed to be with her now, giving her advice. There really was no other way to explain why she was standing up and walking toward the bed. There was no other way to explain the voices in her head. She was getting kind of used to them by now, although she knew they weren't really there. Still, it annoyed her the way they kept calling her Lori when her real name was Lauren. So what if Gary called her Lori? He was her friend. Carl wasn't.

Nor were Carl's partners.

The only light was from her headlamp. It filled the room with shadows. Lauren knelt by the bed. There was definitely something beneath the blankets. It could be another blanket. Or maybe a pile of clothes. Clothes were often put beneath blankets, she thought. She put them there herself sometimes. Once she put a whole pile of laundry beneath her blankets on Halloween in an effort to convince Terry that there was a body sleeping in their bed.

A body, Lori.

Lauren touched the blankets and began to peel them back. She told herself it was her duty to do so, and a voice said inside her head that she should enjoy her duty because it might just...

Get me killed.

Lauren dropped the sheets and sprang to her feet. She had to fight with every nerve in her body to stop trembling, and it was a fight she won for about two seconds. Then she began to scold herself, as was her habit when she was afraid. So the wind was blowing like it hadn't blown in a million years. So Carl had winked at her. So black was playing black. She was a fucking astronaut. She didn't believe in ghosts. If there was a body under the blankets, then fuck it. It was dead. It wasn't going to bite her. It wasn't going to drink her blood. Carl hadn't tried to drink her blood, even if he had talked about it.

Come on, Lori, we did a little more than talk. Admit it.

There is no one there!

Lauren put her finger on the laser trigger and aimed it at the bed. Using the tip of her right boot, she began to ease the blankets away. It was not so terrible. It could have been a lot worse. She knew that from experience. There could have been blood. There could have been dangling nerves, floating eyeballs. Yuck! Here there was just blond hair, pale skin, closed eyes, a frozen grin, a bony chest, gray shorts, skinny legs, and a dead Russian.

Call Jim. Call Jim. Call Jim!

Lauren didn't call anybody. She was under a spell. She was no longer breathing, although blood roared in her head. She knelt beside the dead Russian. She touched his abdomen and studied the texture of his skin. It was not frozen. It was soft, too soft to make sense in the sub-freezing temperature. Increasing the reception of her vocals and tilting her helmet to the side, she pressed her head down and listened for a heartbeat. It was a dumb thing to do with a two-year-old corpse, she realized, and naturally she didn't hear a thing except her own pounding heart. She straightened up and then leaned over to study his face.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

'Jim!' Lauren screamed. She fell on the floor and scrambled away. 'Jim!'

The corpse sat up slowly and faced her, still smiling. Lauren ran backward into the desk. The corpse stood and looked down at her, then took a step toward her. Lauren shoved desperately back against the desk, but it had nowhere to go, and neither did she. The corpse took another step in her direction, and then another. Coming. Coming. Please, Mummy, tell me that it doesn't mean anything, that it's only a story.

Lauren found her laser - it was still around her neck -and aimed the muzzle at the Russian. She put four pounds of pressure on a five-pound trigger and swore in her mind for it to come no closer. Four hundred million miles to rescue you, buddy, but if you touch me, I'll blow your goddamn guts all over the wall.

The Russian's teeth glinted in her head lamp.

It bent over and reached out its hand.

Stop!

'Wait!' Jim called from the doorway. Bill crouched by his side, his own laser aimed at the Russian. Jim stepped into the room. He spoke softly. 'Wait.'

The pale Russian turned his outstretched hand in Jim's direction. They shook hands. Lauren thought she was going to faint. She was pretty sure she had wet the flannels inside her suit. That was OK. Pee smelled a lot better than the room did.

'You're Ivan Zossima,' Jim said, his voice no doubt clear to Ivan even through the faceplate of his helmet. There was plenty of air inside the Karamazov, even if it was cold. 'I remember your face. My name's James Ranoth. We're the

American expedition. We're happy to see you're alive.'

Alive. Ivan nodded his head at the mention of the word. Lauren realized she had almost committed murder.

'Hello,' she said gamely to Ivan. 'I'm sorry about my reaction. It's just that I thought you were dead.' Ivan smiled. She continued, 'My name's Lauren Wagner. Can you speak English?'

Ivan shook his head. Bill stepped into the room, his laser still held ready. 'Where are the other members of your crew?' he asked.

Ivan grinned. His irises were like green marbles.

Lauren whispered to Bill and Jim, 'He looks like he's in shock. When I found him he was lying so still. I ain't kidding, I thought he was dead.'

'If I'd been lying here for two years, I don't think I'd look much better,' Jim said. 'What temperature do you have in here, Lauren?'

'Same as the monitors said downstairs. Just below freezing. He must be cold.'

'He's not shivering,' Bill said. 'Could he have adapted to this temperature out of necessity?'

Lauren nodded. 'There have been cases where people have survived lengthy exposure to cold with little or no protection. Our physiology is remarkably adaptable.'

Ivan stared at them as they spoke. He was exceptionally pale, although he was not emaciated. His eyes were a puzzle. He watched them, yet he did not give the impression he actually saw them. He did not blink.

Jim indicated the picture on the desk. 'Ivan, where is your commander? Where is Dmitri? Do you understand me?'

Ivan nodded. He pointed out the door. His nails were long.

'Anything in the other rooms?' she asked Bill and Jim.

'No,' Bill said. 'I'm going to make a quick inspection of the rest of the ship. Lauren, do not get so close to him that he could take you by surprise.'

'Bill?'

'Do what I say.' He left the room.

Once more Jim gestured to Dmitri's picture. 'Do you really know where the rest of your crew is, Ivan?'

Again Ivan nodded and pointed out the door. 'Are you cold?' Jim asked. He made a shivering gesture. Ivan smiled, showing his big yellow teeth.

'Do you know any Russian, Jim?' Lauren asked. 'I read somewhere that you can speak sixteen languages.'

'I can speak six languages, but unfortunately Russian is not one of them. But Friend can translate what he has to say. Where did you find him? On that bed?'

'Yes,' Lauren said. 'He was just lying there, under the blankets. He didn't get up or move when I walked in.' She paused. 'That's strange. Look at him.'

'What is it?' Jim asked.

'It's his body language. He doesn't have any.'

'He's smiling.'

'Those are not normal smiles,' she said. 'They look mechanical.'

'You'll have to examine him.'

Lauren nodded. 'But we can't take him back to the Hawk. He could have an alien disease.'

'Very alien,' Jim agreed. They lapsed into a watchful silence. Ivan continued to wear his grin, and Lauren was reminded of Carl, blissful Carl. Bill returned.

'The ship's empty,' he said. 'Have you discovered anything further from Zossima?'

'He continues to nod and point out the door when we ask about his companions,' Jim said.

Bill stepped past Ivan and grabbed the photo. He shoved

it in front of Ivan's face and pointed at Dmitri. 'Take us to him,' he said.

Ivan nodded and left the room. They followed after him, and he led them to another bedroom. There he pushed a tiny red button which uncovered a clear round porthole. He pointed east in the direction of Olympus Mons.

'Dmitri Maximov is there?' Bill asked.

Ivan nodded.

'You will take us to him,' Bill said. 'Now.'

Ivan appeared to understand. He nodded again.

Jim gestured to their jeep far below. He made a steering motion. 'Should we drive?' he asked.

Ivan imitated the steering motion and nodded enthusiastically. He led them to the laboratory and began to put on a suit. Bill contacted the Hawk. 'Major Wheeler?'

'Yes, sir?' Gary said.

'We've found a survivor.'

'Sure, Bill. I understand.'

'Ivan Zossima is alive. He appears to know where the rest of his crew is. There are no bodies here. We are going with him in the jeep to investigate. Notify Houston.'

'Huh? You're serious? The dude's really alive?'

'Yes,' Bill said. 'Colonel Brent out.'

When Ivan finished putting on his suit, they left the Karamazov and climbed in the jeep and rolled over the white plateau toward Olympus Mons. The Hawk fell behind on their right. Ivan sat in the front seat with Bill, occasionally pointing the way. Lauren figured if they drove another half mile they would ram into a wall of solid rock. However, as they got closer, she saw a jagged black hole in the side of the mountain, the mouth of a cave. Jim saw it, too, and leaned forward and tapped Ivan on the shoulder. He pointed at the opening. Ivan nodded in his bulky helmet. He was an agreeable fellow.

'If we go into the mountain any distance,' Jim said to Bill. 'We'll lose our communications.'

'I know,' Bill said. He glanced at Ivan. 'We'll stay on our toes.'



A minute later they were forced to park the jeep. The ground before them rose steeply, and it was piled with rocks. The cave loomed a hundred feet overhead. It was lined with sharp stones that bore an uncanny resemblance to teeth. Lauren did not want to go in there. She thought that if she did, she would never come out. But Ivan was leading them happily forward, seemingly gaining new life with each passing second.

The weak gravity helped their climb up the rocks, and they were able to reach the opening of the cave without the aid of ropes or their jetpacks. They carried fresh oxygen canisters with them from the jeep. Plus flares, environmental monitors, and of course their lasers. At the door of the cave, Bill instructed them to halt. Once more he contacted the Hawk.

'Major Wheeler?'

'Your wife is throwing a fit,' Gary said.

'Tell Jessie we will be careful,' Bill said. 'But there could be a danger here, a danger we are totally unfamiliar with.' He explained the terrain to Garry. 'We will be underground for a while. If you do not hear from us in eight hours, you will once again begin preparation to take off, and then leave at the next favorable positioning of the Nova. No effort is to be made to find us. I think you understand the importance of this order, Gary.'

'Not really, but I'll do what you say.'

'Good,' Bill said. He turned off his radio.

'Isn't that a bit drastic?' Lauren asked.

'Not in my opinion,' Bill said. 'But I wouldn't mind if you stayed with Jessie and Gary.'

Lauren shook her head. 'I go where you guys go.'

'We can't be too careful with the rest of mankind,' Jim said to Lauren. She glanced at Ivan. His grin remained frozen on his face as if it were constructed of hard wax.

'I suppose so,' she said.

They plunged into the tunnel, and left the snow behind. Quickly Lauren's eyes adjusted to the dimness. The cave was approximately thirty feet wide, half that in height, with smooth, black, marble-like walls and floor. The floor and walls were not made of marble, however. Not only did the material fail to reflect their lights, it actually seemed to absorb the beams. Jim rubbed his gloved hand over the substance.

'It's of volcanic origin,' he said, puzzled. 'It's very hard. But I don't know what it is.'

'You never told me,' Lauren said. 'Is Olympus Mons extinct?'

'No,' Jim said.

'I wish you'd never told me,' Lauren said. Jim smiled. Lauren continued, 'This place almost looks as if it were carved by a machine.'

'It does appear unnatural, doesn't it?' Jim added thoughtfully, 'Still, here are places on Earth that give the same impression.'

Ivan led them forward at a fast pace. The cave veered to the right, to the left, and then it started to go down, with an angle of declination close to forty degrees. With the exception of Ivan, they all came close to slipping a number of times. The cave kept its uniform black smoothness, and they walked on and on, without much talk. Ivan must have been in good shape, his two years of isolation notwithstanding. Lauren's thirst grew; she felt hot. Perhaps unnaturally hot. When they had been marching for close to thirty

minutes Jim brought them to a sudden halt.

'What is it?' Bill asked. He held his gun ready to fire, and kept his eyes on Ivan.

'What temperature do you have, Lauren?' Jim asked. His voice sounded loud.

'Why, it's two degrees above freezing!' she exclaimed. 'And the air pressure is up threefold. It's at thirty-one millibars.' With the denser air, it was no wonder they sounded loud. They were going to have to turn their vocals down.

'How is that possible?' Bill asked Jim.

'A shift in temperature is to be expected as one goes underground, especially into a volcano. But the pressure is another matter. I've never seen anything like it. It's possible the tunnel is being fed with a constant supply of gas. But I haven't noticed any drafts. I really don't know, Bill.'

'I see,' Bill said.

They continued their descent. Another half hour of vigorous walking passed, which brought them to a distance of approximately three miles from the plateau. If they did not reverse their course soon, Lauren thought, they would be pressed to meet Bill's eight-hour deadline. It was going to take them much longer to climb out of the cave. For all of her

powers of endurance, Lauren was exhausted. More than anything else, she would have liked to stop and drink a big glass of water. Jim trudged by her side, his head bowed, his breathing hard. Of course he never complained. Bill and Ivan pulled a short distance ahead. Incredibly, the air pressure tripled once more, and the temperature crept five degrees above freezing.'

Abruptly their commander stopped and shouted something. Jim and Lauren caught up a minute later. Her first impression was that the cave had dead-ended. Bill and Ivan

stood before a circle of featureless black. Then she realized that a few feet in front of them the walls and the floor vanished. They pointed their lights in every direction and saw nothing.

'You're lucky you didn't walk off the edge,' Jim said.

'No thanks to our friend here,' Bill said. 'Do you think it's safe to shoot a flare?'

Jim considered. 'From the sound of our voices, yes. This space must be huge. But set the fuse for proximity detonation.'

Bill unhooked the flare launcher from his belt and adjusted the fuse. Then he raised his arm and fired. Lauren began to count. When she got to two the place exploded in a dazzling shower of white light. What she saw made her stagger back a step, overwhelmed by the titanic scale of what the flare revealed.

She was looking at the cave's big brother. The walls were smooth black; they rounded up in a half circle from a perfectly flat floor. Only this floor was quarter of a mile across, and the tunnel appeared to stretch forever in both directions. As the flare fell lower and began to die, Lauren saw a sight that filled her with a wonder she had never before experienced.

'He saw canals, there is no doubt.'

The floor was a perfectly still sheet of water.

The flare fizzled in a puff of steam and went out. For a long time they said nothing. Ivan pointed to the right, up along the massive waterway.

'Our friend here seems bent on leading us further,' Bill said finally. He looked over the edge. 'I think it's a good two-hundred-foot drop to that water. What is your opinion, Jim?'

Jim knelt at the edge of the cliff. 'The Russians must have explored this canal.' He pulled up a piece of rope that was fastened to the cliff wall with a metal spike. A faint splash sounded from the water far below. 'The way we just came is wide enough for Hummingbird. The drop would make no difference.'

Bill nodded. 'So I was thinking. Lauren?'

'The atmospheric pressure has increased, but not enough to allow water to exist in its liquid phase.'

'Professor?' Bill said.

Jim shook his head. 'It's close. It's just a little off, like everything else on this planet. The water could contain something that increases its cohesiveness.'

Bill addressed Ivan, who continued to point up the canal. 'Is your commander that way?' he asked.

Ivan nodded.

'Incredible,' Jim whispered. He dropped the rope and climbed to his feet.

'What is it?' Lauren asked. 'I thought he understood some English.'

'No,' Jim said. 'It's incredible that he heard Bill. We have our radios off. Ivan has no vocals.'

'He could have read his lips,' Lauren said.

'First he acts like a mindless zombie,' Bill said sarcastically. 'And now he's reading our lips.'

'The air pressure is much higher,' Lauren said. 'He might have been able to hear us without vocals.'

'It's possible,' Jim said, unconvinced.

'He's always nodding,' Lauren protested.

Bill yelled at Ivan. 'Can you hear me?'

Ivan gave no reaction.

'See,' Lauren said. 'He was just nodding at whatever you said.'

'Maybe,' Bill said slowly. 'Or maybe he just hears what he wants to hear. I don't like anybody who lies in a freezing ship in his underwear for two years. Before we go chasing

up this canal, Friend is going to have a little talk with Ivan. Did you hear that, Mr Zossima?'

Ivan gave no reaction. Bill took his arm. 'Come along,' Bill said.

Ivan shook free. He pointed back up the canal. Bill pointed in the direction of the plateau. He grabbed Ivan's arm a second time. The Russian pulled sharply away.

'Strong devil,' Bill muttered. He aimed the laser at Ivan. Ivan grinned. Bill averted the rifle and fired at the water. A blinding bolt of ruby light cracked the air, followed by a black geyser of gushing steam. The noise echoed into the bowels of Mars.

"The water must be deep,' Jim observed. 'The energy of your laser appears to have been absorbed solely through steam. The shot didn't penetrate to the bedrock.'

Bill turned his weapon back on the Russian. Ivan stopped smiling. He remained stubborn, however, and refused to return with them. Finally Jim intervened.

'Violence won't help us, Bill,' he said. 'If he wants to stay, let him stay. We need Hummingbird anyway.'

Bill nodded reluctantly. 'Very well. Ivan's interrogation will wait. Since our program revolves around discovering the fate of the Russians, we will return with Hummingbird. But we will establish a series of relays starting from the mouth of the cave so that the exploration of this canal can be monitored from the Hawk.'

'Who's going up the canal?' Lauren asked.

'You and Gary will remain at the Hawk,' Bill said. 'Jim and Jessie will be stationed here. I will go up the canal.'

'Alone?' Jim asked.

'No,' Bill said. 'I will take Zossima here, since he's the only guide we have.'

'Do you think that's wise?' Jim asked.

'No,' Bill said. 'But I want the risks to be mine alone.'

With relays, and a booster here, I should be able to remain in constant contact.' Bill gestured to Ivan. 'Lauren, if Zossima insists on staying here until we return, then you had better give him your lamp and an extra oxygen tank. His equipment is adaptable to ours. It was made in the United States. We will start back now.'

Ivan had sat down at the edge of the cliff so that his feet dangled into the void. He appeared to be quite content to remain behind. As Lauren handed him her equipment, he bowed slightly in her direction and said something inside his helmet that she didn't catch. It wasn't Russian, though, she was sure of that. It didn't even sound like words humans normally made, no matter where they came from.



Lori.

Lauren took a step back and Ivan bowed once more. He grinned and showed her all his yellow teeth. She noticed then how red his lips were, how bloodshot his eyes looked. They were like a couple of rotting strawberries staring through veined slots.

Lauren left him quickly. She swore she was never coming down here again.

## TWENTY

Houston approved their plan to explore the 'canal.' Lauren found it interesting how they had all settled on the word. There was no reason to think the waterway was anything more than a natural formation. Jim said Lowell's drawings were coming back to haunt them. Gary was reading *The Martian Chronicles* again.

Houston did not want the public to know of the canal or Ivan, at least for now. Lauren had a feeling they would never know.

At present Lauren sat in the Hawk's control room with Gary. It was cloudy outside, as usual. It was difficult to tell where the sun was, but their clocks said it was going to set soon. On their viewing screens, Bill was giving his wife and Jim final instructions. They sounded oddly familiar. If he did not return in six hours, he said, they were to return to the Hawk and leave Mars. No rescue was to be attempted. Lauren and Gary watched as Bill climbed into the front seat of Hummingbird beside Ivan. He carried a laser.

'Why is he so fanatical about us leaving at the first sign of trouble?' Lauren asked.

Gary leaned back in his chair. He wore a royal blue sweatsuit that went well with his curly black hair. 'You forget Bill's a colonel in the United States Air Force,' he said. 'He's just afraid of a Communist plot.'

'I'm serious, Gary.'

He yawned. 'So am I.'

'There's more to it than national security. Jim's full of foreboding hints, too. I keep thinking they know something we don't.' Lauren shook her head. 'You have to see that Ivan. He's so weird. Bill and Jim are very suspicious of him.'

Gary was unimpressed. 'You're the doctor, Lori. Both of them are probably concerned that Ivan's contracted a new disease that he's anxious to share with us.'

'If that's true,' Lauren said, 'then the disease appears to have helped keep Ivan alive.'

'Why haven't you examined him yet?' Gary asked.

'When? I had to chase after him right after I met him. Then he refused to return to the ship.'

Hummingbird lifted from the floor of the cave and floated over the icy waters. Lauren activated a monitor that relayed the reception from the craft's forward camera back to the Hawk. Slowly Bill dropped Hummingbird near to the water, using the surface to create a trapped air cushion, and thus save fuel. The canal swam with tiny waves beneath the force of the jets. Bill put Hummingbird in first gear and the ship moved forward. A powerful wide-angle searchlight illuminated his path. Curved black walls drifted by. Bill upped his speed.

'How is she handling over the water?' Jim asked from his position at the edge of the cliff.

'Smooth,' Bill said.

'Watch your fuel,' Jim cautioned.

Gary nudged Lauren's side. 'Here we are thirsty, and we've a canal full of water to drink,' he said.

'Don't even talk about it,' Lauren said. 'It will just tempt us. We still need to get a sample to examine.' She paused. 'I

shouldn't have drunk so much when I returned.'

'Don't sweat it, Doc,' Gary said. 'No pun intended. I'm not feeling too dry. But I'm worried about Jim. He hardly drank a thing. I think he wants us to take his share.'

'I didn't know that,' Lauren said.

'Martyrs,' Gary said. 'They turn up on space expeditions all the time.'

'Hey, Gary?' Lauren said. 'You read up on the Russian crew. What do you remember about Ivan Zossima?'

He shrugged. 'Ask Friend. He probably knows what Ivan's favorite ice cream is.'

'Friend, give me a visual on Ivan Zossima,' Lauren said. 'Screen F. Cut the audio. We should have checked on him right away, Gary.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

"There's a lot of things we're not doing,' Gary muttered.

Lauren studied the screen.

[Zossima, Ivan Gregory: 1970-? Russian cosmonaut. Born in Volgograd. Only child. Received elementary education at Lock, where he won distinguished honors. Entered the University of Volgograd in 1988 and was awarded a B.S. in physics in 1992, an M.S. in aeronautics in 1995. Entered the Russian Academy for Cosmonaut Training in 1996. Is best known as second in command of Project Gorbachev, the first manned expedition to Mars. Believed to have perished on the Martian surface in 2002. Detailed summary follows:]

'Wait, Friend,' Lauren said, glancing back at the screen that was hooked into Hummingbird's forward camera. The walls of the canal had not changed, nor had the water. Bill had upped his speed to fifty miles an hour. 'Give me a visual on the subjects Ivan studied while at Volgograd University,' she said.

[Yes, Lauren. 1988: Psychology, Russian Literature,

Physics, Calculus, Chemistry, English 1.]

'Stop,' Lauren said. 'Did he study English as a foreign language?'

[Yes, Lauren.]

'For how many semesters?'

[Four, Lauren.]

'Based on the records of his performance in those courses, would you say he could speak English?'

[Yes, Lauren. But not fluently.]

'Does he have any record of psychological difficulties?'

[No, Lauren.]

'They don't send people to Mars who are nuts,' Gary said.

'You heard what Friend said about his English courses,' Lauren said.

'I had four semesters of German in college, and the only thing I can remember is how to ask someone if they're sick. Bist du krank? Ivan probably just forgot most of what he learned.'

'I wonder,' Lauren said. She opened a line to Jim. 'This is Lauren.'

'Bill doesn't seem to be getting anywhere,' Jim said. 'It's incredible - the symmetry of the walls. What can I do for you, Lauren?'

'I've been checking up on Ivan Zossima,' she said. 'It seems he took four semesters of English while in college.'

Jim considered. 'Interesting. Did you hear that, Bill?'

'That's interesting,' Bill said. His voice sounded distant. But then a note of excitement entered it. 'Can all of you see this?' Bill asked.

Lauren's eyes flew back to the screen. The scenery was changing, in a big way.

'Wow,' Gary gasped.

The canal's walls had come to an abrupt end. Bill

revolved the forward camera around the space and revealed nothing, absolutely nothing. He had entered a gigantic cavern.

'Do you see a shore in the distance?' Jim asked.

'No,' Bill said. 'Nor a ceiling.' He panned the camera back the way he had come, down the canal, which resembled an endless archway.

'Right now would be a very easy time to get lost,' Jim warned.

'I'm holding my position,' Bill said. 'But my guide is urging me forward. I'm sending up a flare.'

Bill aimed his camera into the heart of the void. Seconds went by. Suddenly a white star took birth in the void, and Lauren faintly glimpsed a distant island. Yet she saw no enclosing walls, no ceiling. Soon the flare exhausted itself, and went out in the black water. Night returned. Fortunately Friend had frozen their brief glimpse at its moment of greatest resolution. Lauren studied a secondary screen. The island looked like a barren Pacific atoll that had been transplanted to the far side of the moon.

'What is the distance to that land mass, Friend?' Bill asked.

[1.782 miles, Bill.]

'Professor?' Bill said.

'What can I say?' Jim replied. 'Be careful.'

Hummingbird flew forward. Several minutes passed. Vague outlines of a lonely shore began to emerge in the beam of Bill's searchlight. But when he was on the verge of reaching the land, the picture went fuzzy.

'Stop,' Jim ordered.

Bill did so. 'What is it?'

'We're losing the picture,' Jim said.

'What about my voice?' Bill asked.

'It's a bit lower, but still clear,' Jim said.

'Could the many miles of the canal be responsible for the interference?' Bill asked.

'I think the island is to blame,' Jim said. 'If it is an island. The interference came very suddenly. How is your compass?'

'Spinning,' Bill said.

'Magnetic,' Jim muttered.

'I'll proceed slowly,' Bill said.

'Be careful,' Jessica whispered.

Their video reception quickly worsened. Lauren strained for details. She saw a low natural wall separating the water from a relatively flat beach. Bill landed Hummingbird on the beach. The picture became so bad it was next to useless.

'Send up another flare,' Jim advised. 'Let's get a better look at where you are.'



'A moment,' Bill said. 'I want to examine this coast.' He sounded as if he were climbing out of Hummingbird, and then walking.

Then she heard a second pair of feet, coming quickly.

'Bill!' Jim shouted. 'Watch your back!'

'Professor,' Bill said, a note of surprise in his voice. Then his voice became pure surprise as he let out a shocked cry. 'Oh!'

They heard a loud splash, a horrible choking sound. Then silence...

Hummingbird's picture went dead.

'William!' Jessica cried.

They called for five minutes before any of them would admit that they had lost the commander. In the control room of the Hawk, Lauren bowed her head. 'I should never have woken that corpse up,' she said.

TWENTY-ONE

The flashing red light on the airlock turned a steady green. The door slid open. Jim trudged inside and plopped down on a chair. Lauren helped Jessica remove her helmet. Jessica did not look upset, or sad, or alive.

'Oh, Jessie,' Lauren cried. 'I'm so sorry. We shouldn't have let him go. He was always too brave. We'll do something. We'll think of something.'

Jessica's face was blank. 'What, Lauren? What will we do?'

They looked to Jim, their new commander, their wizard. Lauren prayed that he would find the magic that would make everything all right. 'Let's get out of these suits,' he said. 'We'll talk in the living area.'

Later, they gathered at Jim's feet. He wanted to know if there was any word from Houston.

Gary snickered. 'They're in conference. They'll be in conference two years from now, at the next Martian conjunction.'

Jim took a deep breath. Salt crusted his parched lips. 'We have Bill's last orders. We're supposed to leave without him.'

'We can't leave William,' Jessica mumbled. 'No.'

Lauren spoke bitterly. 'To hell with his last order.'

'What do you say, Gary?' Jim asked quietly.

Gary stood and paced the floor. 'He was my commander. He gave me an order. I always follow orders.' Gary stopped and pounded the wall. 'Hell, I don't want to leave Bill. But what does it matter what any of us want? Hummingbird is gone. I sure can't swim three miles in a pressure suit.'

'It would be dangerous,' Jim said to himself.

'What?' Lauren asked.

Jim smiled faintly. 'I always wanted to be a sailor.'

'A boat?' Lauren asked. 'How could we build a boat?'

'I've given the matter some thought,' Jim said. 'Actually, we don't have to build a boat. We already have one. The jeep. All we have to do is drive it down there, pop the engine out, and lower it over the side.'

Gary was skeptical. 'It would sink.'

'No,' Jim said. 'I've worked it out mathematically. The wheels will displace enough water to float four people.'

'It'll leak,' Gary said 'The bowl of the jeep isn't watertight.'

'It will only leak in two places,' Jim said. 'At the steering wheel shaft and at the accelerator pedal. We'll patch those two places.'

'What will we use to propel it?' Gary asked.

'Our shovels,' Jim said. 'They can be used as paddles.'

Gary thought for a moment. 'It might work.'

Lauren sprang to her feet. 'Let's start now.'

'Wait,' Jim said.

'What is it?' Lauren asked.

'Our original question,' Jim said. 'We've all brushed it aside. Should we go after Bill? Or better yet, what happened to him?'

'Ivan attacked him,' Jessica said bitterly. Life had returned to her face with Jim's suggestion of a boat.

Jim nodded. 'Yes. But how did Ivan overcome him?'

Bill's a strong man. Plus he carried a laser rifle.'

'Ivan snuck up on him from behind,' Lauren said. 'It sounded like he pushed him in the water.'

'What of it?' Jim said. 'A momentary drenching shouldn't have harmed Bill's suit or his laser. He should still have been able to fend for himself.' 'What are you thinking?' Gary asked. 'Many things,' Jim said. 'Why did Ivan do it? Supposedly he was leading us to the

rest of his crew. I never believed that, nor did Bill. How could any of them have survived outside the confines of their ship? At best I thought he might know where their bodies were. But I had other reasons to doubt Ivan. He walked and acted like a zombie, yet at the same time there was a shrewd intelligence about him. Look at what he accomplished. Without saying a word, he tricked us all into letting him accompany Bill -alone - to a spot I believe he was anxious to return to. Then he successfully overcame Bill. Some zombie. But why did he do it? I keep coming back to that.' 'He's insane,' Lauren said. 'He's a monster,' Jessica said. 'Maybe he just hates blacks,' Gary said. Jim rubbed his tired eyes. 'Something inside me keeps warning me to stop and think, to put all these pieces together so that they make sense. I feel I must do this before it's too late.' He looked at Jessica. 'I'm sorry, Jessie - it's probably too late already. The chances are Bill is dead.'

Lauren rubbed Jessica's shoulders. 'We'll work on the boat with the assumption that he's still alive,' Lauren said. 'We'll work as fast as we can.'

'If the boat idea does work,' Gary said. 'We'll be prowling around down there in the dark with a lunatic lurking nearby. He'll probably have Bill's laser.'

'It's something to keep in mind,' Jim said. He stood slowly. 'I guess the bottom line is that we won't go home without him. Gary, notify Mark and Houston of our plans. We'll work on the boat immediately.'

'What if Houston objects?' Gary asked.

'Let them object,' Jim said. 'It won't bother me.'

Jessica began to cough. 'I need water,' she whispered.

Lauren went into the basement and returned with their final one-gallon jug. She let Jessica drink about ten ounces before taking the bottle away. She handed the water to Jim. 'Your turn,' she said.

'Maybe later,' he said. 'I'm feeling pretty good right now.'

Lauren shoved the jug in his face. 'Drink ten ounces right now. That's a medical order.'

Jim took the water after a moment's hesitation. Lauren knew he was close to dehydration. Outside the porthole, the sky had cleared, and Olympus Mons's full majesty stood uncloaked. Stars twinkled around its broad caldera like jewels in a king's crown.

'I keep thinking of all those cubic miles of water underneath that volcano,' Jim said. 'And then I think about how thirsty I am.'

Lauren nodded. 'That's bad.'

Jim screwed the top back on the water jug. 'I think it might be part of the plan,' he said.

They ended up dismembering the jeep after they had driven it to the canal. Jim figured it would save them time and energy. He was right about how simple it was to modify the vehicle, much to Gary's surprise. The most difficult part was unscrewing the engine and lifting it out. Here the low Martian gravity came to their aid. They used more of the same metal sheets they had used to patch the hull of the Hawk to plug around the jeep's gas pedal and steering column. Gary took less than twenty minutes to weld the metal in place. One thing for sure, Jim said: they weren't going to be able to fix the jeep again so that it drove on land. If the modifications went better than they hoped, lowering the jeep down to the water proved to be a bitch. The Hawk's stores contained an excellent set of pulleys and ropes. Unfortunately, they had difficulty fastening the equipment to the smooth black floor of the cave. The material was not simply hard; it was next to impenetrable. Studying the area around the Russian's spike, Jim figured they had melted the ground in order to put it in. He decided to do likewise to secure their pulleys. Watching the ground turn red and soften under the fierce green laser of the welding gun, Lauren couldn't free herself of the idea that the ground was really composed of an intelligently formulated alien alloy. Jim said it was as hard as anything he had ever seen.

Finally they were in a position to lower their makeshift boat, and Gary's muscles came in handy, never mind the low gravity. It was two hundred feet to the water, and they all sighed with relief when the jeep didn't sink.

'Of course, it will be worse if it sinks when we're in it,' Jim said.

Houston had not approved or disapproved of their plan, but Houston had made one thing plain, and Jim had agreed. Under no circumstances was Gary to accompany them on the rescue attempt. He was the only one who could fly the Hawk now that Bill was missing. In fact, Jim and Houston didn't want Lauren to come, either, but she had insisted. Jessica was a fine biochemist but Lauren didn't think she'd be of much help to Jim in the event Ivan came after them.

The Hawk also carried a lengthy rope ladder in its stores.

Jim and Jessica climbed down to the boat first; it appeared to support them without strain. Finally it was Lauren's turn. Gary gave her a goodbye hug.

'If you see the bastard, shoot first and ask questions later,' he said.

'Are you talking about Ivan or Bill?' she said.

He swatted her on the butt. 'Keep your head low, Doc'

Lauren started down the ladder, knowing that if she slipped, she would probably die in the icy waters of the canal. She tried imagining she was in the forest in Wyoming near Terry's cabin, climbing out of a green pine tree into the blue lake. Those days seemed centuries ago.

'Ten more rungs and you're down, Lauren,' Jim said a minute later, shining a light at her feet.

Lauren stepped carefully onto the wobbly craft and quickly dropped to her knees. They distributed their weight about the boat and Jessica handed her a shovel to paddle with. 'How long will it take us to go three miles, Jim?' she asked.

'It depends on which way the wind is blowing,' he said.

After some experimenting, they decided that only two should paddle at one time. Because Jim was showing signs of fatigue, Lauren suggested she and Jessica take the first shift. Lauren was pleasantly surprised to find how easily the boat moved once they got going. The calmness of the water helped. Lauren and Jessica slipped into a steady rhythm, keeping the raft close to the wall of the canal lest they accidentally reverse their direction. Time flowed by, measured in strokes.

'Hold,' Jim said suddenly, after about forty minutes. Lauren relaxed, glad for the break. Her right biceps was beginning to cramp. 'Still there, Gary?' Jim asked.

'Yes,' Gary said. 'Have you reached the end of the tunnel?'

'Yes. Now all we have to do is cross over to the island.' Jim paused. 'How are you sitting, Gary?'

'Huh?'

'Sit with your back to one of the walls so you can see in both directions at once,' Jim said.



'Why?' Gary asked.

'I don't want anyone to be able to sneak up on you,' Jim said.

'Now you're making me paranoid,' Gary said, his voice uneasy. 'Hey, your signal's getting dim.'

'It's the same pattern as before,' Jim muttered. 'When we reach the island, we'll probably lose contact altogether. When you think you've waited long enough...'

'Understood,' Gary said.

Jim reached for a paddle. 'Let me give one of you girls a break.'

'I want to keep paddling,' Jessica said.

'We're a team,' Lauren said. 'We're training for the Martian Olympics. You take it easy.'

'Sure?' Jim asked.

'Sure,' Lauren said. 'What now?'

Jim dimmed their lamp. 'Ordinarily I would send up a flare, but surprise might be a strong element in our favor. Of course, that means we might miss the island altogether

and get lost in the dark. Try to paddle as evenly as possible so that we go as straight as possible.'

The last half mile seemed to take far longer than the previous mile. Lauren found it difficult to reach forward on her stroke; she kept expecting to see Ivan's face grinning at her from beneath the water. Eventually, though, without warning, they bumped against a sharp-edged four-foot natural wall. They hauled themselves onto the desolate beach and secured the raft. The ground was similar to the floor of the tunnel, and for the short distance they could

see with their lights, it was also flat. Regrettably, Hummingbird was nowhere to be seen. They didn't know whether to head to the right or the left, or straight ahead. Plus, Gary was no longer answering their calls. And on top of everything else, they realized that one of them had to stay behind and guard the raft. Lauren volunteered.

Jim and Jessica went to the right and hugged the coast, searching for Hummingbird as a starting point. Lauren killed her light and sat down in a night so black she could have been in a buried coffin. She kept her back to the water, and had her vocals turned to maximum reception, straining to hear even the faintest sound of approaching feet.

After approximately fifteen minutes, Jim's voice whispered over her headset. They had found Hummingbird, undamaged and deserted. They were starting inland. Jim said he would spot the ground every hundred feet with phosphorescent paint. Lauren wished them good luck.

More time passed. Lauren's legs began to stiffen. She stood and walked back and forth on the empty beach, stretching. She knew it was psychological, but the darkness seemed to be getting thicker, crowding down upon her. She even began to have trouble breathing, and had to check her suit monitors every few seconds to convince herself she was not running out of oxygen. Jim spoke again in her headset, and this time she jumped. They had found hills, he said, and ponds of water, and dangerous crevasses. But no Bill. The interference must indeed be radiating from the island. She could scarcely hear him. She told him to be careful.

It was a shame they were not able to follow her advice. Only a few minutes later, Jim was on the radio again. Jessica had fallen into a gully and hit her head. Her suit was intact and she was breathing normally, but she was unconscious, and he couldn't wake her. Lauren said she would come. Jim said something else as she got up but his remark was lost in the growing static. Lauren thought he might have used the word pushed.

Lauren turned on her headlamp, out of necessity, and began to trace her friends' steps at a brisk pace. It took her only a few minutes to reach Hummingbird. The craft appeared undamaged. She tried contacting Jim but couldn't get him. She briefly contemplated flying Hummingbird inland to where Jessica lay injured. Then she vetoed the idea, remembering that Ivan might have Bill's laser. If he did, it would be a snap for him to blow her out of the air. Damn the president, she thought, for giving them such dangerous weapons. They would have been better off with nothing.

Jim's markers were readily visible, eerie X's of phosphorescence. She scuttled from one to the next with her head low and her legs bent, like an animal on the prowl. But who was chasing after whom? Her every step generated a trail of false echoes, creating the illusion that she was being followed. Perhaps because she was so thirsty, she suddenly felt dizzy. She had felt the same way aboard the Gorbachev, just before making Carl's acquaintance. She didn't like it. The funny thoughts came into her head, the thoughts that were more like whispers in a dream, a very bad dream that was taking her forever to wake up from. Or maybe she was just talking to herself, and that was all there was to it. She had to talk to somebody. She could see it now. The papers would say what a brave woman she had been. She went to Mars and never returned. She left behind one darling sister and one lovely fiancé. A sad tale but true, and the later expeditions never found her body.

Lauren reached the hills Jim had mentioned. Here the ground lost its hard smoothness, becoming rough and brittle in texture. She tried her radio again. 'Jim? Jim?' There was no response, and the silence made her worry, boy did it make her worry.

She plowed forward. The ground rose gradually at first, and then began to seesaw sharply. Aiming her lamp upward, she realized she had moved beneath an overhang of rock. She tried to convince herself that was the reason Jim couldn't hear her, but since he hadn't heard her before, when there was nothing overhead, she doubted she was on the right track.

Ivan couldn't have gotten him. I was just talking to him.

Lauren slowed her pace a notch as the ground became extremely uneven. She should have slowed down a couple of notches. A few seconds later the ground disappeared altogether beneath her left foot as she tripped into a small hole. She hit the ground with both hands outstretched and thus saved her faceplate from damage. But her left leg twisted out at an awkward angle and she heard an ugly pop in her knee. A burning liquid sensation throbbed through her calf and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. She climbed to her feet carefully. She suspected that she had torn her cartilage, and maybe even injured one of the ligaments in the knee. Walking was barely tolerable, but she kept going, all the while cursing the planet. It wasn't fair, she thought. Just when she needed all her strength, Mars had to slip a hole under her foot. It was almost as if the place, as well as Ivan, was after her.

Oh, Lori.

Lauren whirled and snapped up the laser. But no one was there; no one ever was. It was just like the Gorbachev and the Karamazov all over again. Invisible corpses and zombies calling to her between her ears, where they had no right to be. A second wave of dizziness swept over her. For a moment she feared the light atop her helmet was failing, for it flickered. But perhaps it was her eyes that were the

problem, she could not be sure. She wished she could remove her helmet for a moment to rub them. They seemed to be reflecting on her faceplate inside her helmet; she would have liked to have rubbed the glass as well. Just to be sure it wasn't Carl's eyes she was seeing again. Yes, Lori, wouldn't that be amazing. We could rub our special parts together and enjoy every inch of our duty. Surely that wouldn't make us evil.

Lauren came to a pond. Focusing her helmet light on the water, she noticed that, although the bedrock was clearly visible near the edge of the pond, it dropped off sharply only a short distance out. The pond must be deep.

What is that?

Lauren took a step closer to the water, and as she did so, she listened closely. Tiny ripples had begun to arise on the surface of the pond, and she was hoping that a breeze was causing them. But of course she didn't hear any breeze because she was miles under the ground. Something else must be causing the ripples.

Something beneath the surface of the pond.

Lauren slowly began to back away from the water's edge. It wasn't fair. She didn't want to die. Not in this hell. Anywhere but here. The planet was supposed to be uninhabited. Everyone knew that. The best scientists on Earth had written books about how totally uninhabited Mars was. She had read their books. Yet there was only one thing wrong with those scientists. They had never been to Mars.

Something beneath the surface began to splash loudly.

Lauren turned and ran.

It wasn't fair. She tripped in another hole.

A spray of water erupted at her back, as a creature quick and terrible emerged from the cold well. Lauren froze -for a split second - and then leapt to her feet. But she

jumped up without first figuring out what she wanted to do. For starters she tried to flee, but her injured knee buckled after only half a dozen steps and down she went again. Even in her extreme terror, she quickly realized she was not going to be able to outrun it. Without looking, she could hear it coming, coming fast.

Yes, Lori.

Frantically Lauren moved up onto her good knee and pivoted her body, bringing the muzzle of the laser to bear while simultaneously reaching for the trigger. But then Mars itself betrayed her again. The rifle weighed thirty pounds on Earth, but only ten on Mars. The mass, however, and therefore the inertia, was unaffected by which planet the weapon was on. The laser might have felt light, but it was in reality still a respectable chunk of electronic gadgetry. As she spun around, she generated enough momentum to swing her well past her target. In fact she spun almost an additional half circle around before she could stop herself. As a result she placed her back directly in the path of her assailant. Before she could straighten out, a wet and powerful arm wrapped around her neck.

'Jim!' she screamed.

The arm tightened and lifted her off the ground. Lauren pounded wildly with her fists. It was dragging her toward the pond. Calling upon every muscle in her body, she yanked herself to the side. Its grip was awesome, impossible. She didn't budge an inch.

'Kill you!' she cried. 'I'll kill you!'

Her laser swung freely at her side. If she had but a few inches, she could revolve it around and fire. She kicked at the ground, arched her back, and swung with her elbows. She accomplished nothing. It wrapped a second arm around her. It could have whispered in her ear. Suddenly she knew its purpose. It was going to drag her into the water

and hold her head under the black surface until the cold penetrated her brain and poisoned her mind. Then she would be just like it was. Just like Carl.

They were almost there. Lauren heard splashes. Time to swim. Just the two of us, naked together, Lori.

'No!' Lauren screamed.

Abruptly the grip loosened, as the creature stumbled on the underlying bedrock. Lauren heaved to the side. Incredibly, she broke free.

'Bastard!' she cursed.

Lauren dashed from the pond, water spraying her faceplate. But in her hurry, she failed to establish her balance properly, and stumbled once more. Passionate claws chased after her. Wait, Lori. Let's talk. Let's discuss. I love you, Lori.

She was learning. She was going to run no further, and she was not going to lose her balance again. Carefully rotating through a half-kneeling position, she brought up the laser. She took quick aim. She was barely in time. The creature's fingers were reaching for the tip of the muzzle when she pulled the trigger.

There was a blinding explosion. The shock of it threw Lauren to the ground, where the top of her helmet hit a rock. For a minute she lay dazed, pulsating spots of gray and brown clouding her vision. When she tried to sit up, her head sagged on her shoulders as if her neck had turned to putty. There was red everywhere. At first, she attributed the color to the shock her eyes had received with the firing of the laser. But then she blinked a few times, and the red became clearer. She was a doctor. It shouldn't have mattered that the red was blood - splattered everywhere. But all her training had not prepared her for what she saw.

Because the human body was mostly water, the laser beam had vaporized the liquid within his midsection, which is where she had been aiming when she pulled the trigger. The pressure of the steam had caused a violent internal explosion and torn him into two gaping sections, and a number of smaller pieces; there was seared flesh all over the entire area. Still, Lauren had seen some pretty messy bodies in her days at the hospital. She might have held on if her lamp had not accidentally flickered onto the edge of the pond, and revealed his faceplate. His head and face were still there, clearly visible atop a mound of dripping white ribs and spongy pink lungs. His skin was still pale and his lips still red. But it was just too much, too much by about sixty million miles, that Ivan was still grinning at her. Lauren fainted.

She could hear someone calling her name from far away. It didn't sound like anyone she knew. It was probably a policeman. Over here, officer. She remembered being in a terrible accident. I'm in the bushes, officer. She remembered blood, everywhere. She opened her eyes and winced as a bright light stung them.

'Please help me, sir,' she whispered.

'It's Jim, Lauren.' He knelt by her side. 'Everything's all right. You killed him.'

Lauren sat up slowly. One glance at the pond was more than enough to bring back the attack. She felt sick to her stomach.

Would someone please close his eyes.

'He won't be bothering us anymore,' Jim said.

She looked away. "That's for damn sure.'

'Are you hurt? Is your suit damaged?'

'I'm fine.' Jim helped her to her feet, and her left knee reminded her that she was not perfectly fine. The joint felt like burning mush. 'Where's Jessie?' she asked.

'I left her where she fell. I couldn't raise you on the radio,



and you were taking so long to reach us. Then I heard an explosion and raced here.' He hugged her. 'I don't think I've ever been so glad to see someone in my entire life. I take it Ivan attacked you?'

'Yes.' She shivered. 'But let's talk about it later. Let's get Jessie. I hate the thought of her lying out there all alone. Even with Ivan dead.'

'I know what you mean,' he said.

Jim carried her laser, and offered his arm for support. Jessica was half a mile away, and Lauren limped the whole way. The terrain continued to climb, and the number of ponds and pits only increased. Jim thought the hills had been created by recent volcanic activity. He called them an afterthought.

Jessica was not alone in the crevice when they reached her. Her husband knelt by her side. He stood quickly at their approach.

'Bill!' Lauren exclaimed.

'Man, are you OK?' Jim cried.

They climbed into the wide crack in the ground. Their commander greeted them quickly and efficiently, as though nothing extraordinary had happened - the same old Bill. Of course, he was concerned about his wife. He wanted to know what had happened to her. While Jim explained the situation, including Ivan's attack, Lauren gave Jessica a brief examination. She said she wasn't bleeding and nothing appeared to be broken. However, she had an ugly bruise on her forehead and her breathing was not normal; it was definitely slow and shallow. Lauren feared she had suffered a serious concussion, and was now slipping into a coma. Lauren told Bill the bad news and he took his wife's hand and placed his left palm on the top of her helmet. Almost immediately Jessica's eyes opened.

So much for my diagnosis.

'Don't touch me,' Jessica whispered.

'Jessie,' Lauren said loudly. 'It's us. Stay awake. Bill's here.'

A slow smile filled Jessica's face. 'You got away, William.'

Bill helped her up and Jessica hugged him. The enemy was dead, and her friends were alive. Lauren began to relax. They had been lucky, she thought, very lucky.

Bill related his story. As they had surmised, Ivan had surprised him from behind and pushed him in the water. The water didn't harm his suit, but when he climbed back on the shore and tried to shoot Ivan, his laser was dead. The liquid must have got into the electronics. Ivan wasn't through. He attacked Bill again, and he was fierce, and remarkably strong. He tried to rip off Bill's oxygen tanks, and Bill was barely able to escape in one piece. But he had nowhere to flee except inland. It was his hope to lure Ivan away from Hummingbird, and then circle around and leave in the hovercraft. Unfortunately, without visible landmarks, he got lost in the dark. He had been wandering around for what seemed an eternity when he chanced upon Jessica.

'But one good thing has come from this,' Bill said. 'While I was lost, I stumbled upon a volcanic cavern. It's beneath a hill close to the center of the island. A narrow cave leads down into a huge room filled with bubbling lava pits. There's a dig in there - it's obvious the Russians were working on it. You must visit this place, Professor. All of you must go there. It's a fascinating place.'

'Shouldn't we just return home?' Jim asked. 'Our water supply is almost gone.'

'Not yet,' Bill said. 'We have a job to do. Billions have been spent on this mission. We can survive another day or two. For now we will return to the Hawk, and Lauren will

examine Jessica more carefully. We will rest. But tomorrow I want to explore further.' Bill paused. 'We still have to find out what happened to the Russians.'

## TWENTY-TWO

Professor James Ranoth awoke from an uneasy doze, feeling dry and troubled. He checked his watch and sighed. It was late afternoon on the day after the day they had set out to examine the Karamazov. He had been in bed for three hours, but he couldn't have slept more than twenty minutes. Insomnia had been his lifelong companion, but unlike most people, he always enjoyed the hour or two before sleep came; he used the time to think long and deep, or just to daydream. But what plagued his mind now, and refused to let him rest, was far from pleasant. He felt dread, pure and simple. He had felt it since the first night they spent on Mars. Only now it was much worse.

Jim sat up. Gary slept peacefully in bed on the other side of the room, but Bill was missing. Lauren had ordered the entire crew to rest for a minimum of six hours, when they had finally returned from their adventures beneath the surface. To simply ignore Lauren's order, Bill couldn't have been that tired, or else he had felt there was something that needed his immediate attention.

Jim stood and went into the empty living area. It was then he noticed the odd odor. It smelled unlike anything he had encountered before, sort of a cross between spoiled eggs and drying blood. He reminded himself that their

recycling systems were damaged, but the reminder did nothing to soothe his nerves. At the same time he wondered whether he was really smelling anything at all, whether it wasn't just in his mind. In either case whether inside his nostrils or inside his head, the smell was repulsive.

Jim decided to check on the women. He opened their door quietly. Jessica lay on her side without a cover, her mouth wide open and snoring. Lauren was flat on her back, her pretty features at peace. She, also, was uncovered, and Jim had a fatherly urge to tuck the sheet around her. He had never understood why he loved her so much, but he knew that his love was the one thing he didn't need to understand. She was special to him, it was that simple. What was more complex was how he was going to keep her safe. The possibility that she might not return home was unbearable to him.

Jim was on the verge of leaving when Lauren's forehead suddenly creased. She was having a nightmare, he thought, and he considered waking her. But if she regained consciousness now, he knew she would probably remember the nightmare, and for no reason that fact disturbed him. He continued to watch her. She raised and moved her arms above her chest as if she were trying to push something away. Her breathing became rough, and her exposed flesh was suddenly covered with gooseflesh. Finally, however, she relaxed, and her arms dropped to her sides. Jim closed the door.

He was climbing the ladder that led to the control room when the pain started in his chest. It was like a heavy weight on top of his ribcage. The pain spread quickly across his shoulders and down into his arms. He closed his eyes and took slow deep breaths. He didn't need Lauren to tell him it

was his heart. The long sleep had been unkind to him. Since awakening from hibernation, he'd had trouble catching his breath. He knew Lauren suspected he had a problem, but he had fooled her the last time she had examined him aboard the Nova, just prior to the Gorbachev rendezvous. He had tampered with her medical computer, and made it register the same EKG tracing as the person who had been examined before him, which just happened to be Gary. He'd done this so he wouldn't be disqualified from the second landing. He wanted to be with his friends when they learned the fate of the Russians. He believed then, as he did now, that they would need his help.

The pain eased. Feeling small and inadequate, Jim climbed the remainder of the ladder into the control room. Bill sat before Friend's main program console. The sky outside the windows was a dull pink and filled with clouds.

'Can't sleep, either?' Bill asked, without looking up.

'I never sleep that much as it is,' Jim said. 'Have you been talking with Mark, or is this his rest period, too? The last couple of days have got me confused.'

'I can't raise him,' Bill said.

Jim's heart skipped. 'Are the communications out again?'

'Yes'

Jim crossed to the computer board. 'When did this happen?' he asked. He checked the Hawk's electrical power supply.

'An hour ago.'

'Why didn't you wake me?' Jim asked.

'You looked exhausted. I wanted you to rest.'

'It must be the generators again. Have you cross-checked the A and C coils?'

'Yes,' Bill said. "They appear in good shape.'

'What does Friend say?' Jim asked.

'Ask him.'

'Friend, we have a malfunction in our communication systems. What is the cause?'

[I am unable to diagnose the difficulty.]

'Why not?' Jim asked.

[Because of damage to my own systems that I sustained during the landing.]

It struck Jim as odd Friend hadn't mentioned such specific damage before. He spoke to Bill. 'I want to check the generators directly. They're powered by our rocket fuel. We could have a serious pump malfunction.'

Bill looked at him for the first time. 'Why don't you have a seat, Jim, and relax.'

'OK.' Jim sat in a swivel chair opposite his commander. 'It has to be the generators. They caused the interruption the first time.'

'I've inspected the generators. I told you they're fine.'

'You may have missed something,' Jim said.

'I doubt it.'

Jim leaned back in his chair, feeling strangely trapped. 'What is your opinion then, sir, as to the source of our problem?'

Bill was unconcerned. 'It could be a million things. We can always get home without communications.'

'Are you suggesting we leave now?'

'No,' Bill said.

'But you don't want to explore that island tomorrow, do you? In light of this problem?'

'But I do. With the limited time available to us, exploration must be our first priority.'

'What did you see down there, Bill, that was so fascinating?'

His commander brightened. 'Inside the hill I spoke of is a cavern with strangely symmetrical dimensions. The place is lit by glowing pools of lava.' His tone became confidential. 'I'm not an archaeologist or a geologist like you, Professor, but I think there's evidence of an incredibly ancient civilization in that place.'

Jim tried to check his rising excitement, for he sensed danger. 'What evidence did you see?' he asked.

'Nothing specific. But the Russians were digging in a particular area. I feel certain you'll discover something there.'

The answer was ridiculously vague. Jim's feelings of trouble deepened. 'You want us all to go to this place?' he asked.

Bill rotated his chair until he was facing the ever-present mass of Olympus Mons. The caldera was lost in pink clouds. The cave into the depths was a faint black mark on the mountain's rock walls.

'Even though we're in a hurry, we have to be careful,' Bill said. 'For that reason, I will explore the volcanic room, and will take only one companion with me per visit. Because of your expertise, you will be the first to come with me. But if time permits, everyone will be given an opportunity.'

'That sounds reasonable,' Jim said, barely hiding the sarcasm in his voice. He had finally realized what had been tugging at the back of his mind since he asked Friend about their failed communications. The computer had answered him, but had not addressed him by his first name, which it invariably did when responding to a person's initial question. Was the change in protocol another by product of Friend's internal damage? Or was sabotage the answer? -

Jim came to a decision. He would tell Lauren and Gary

of his fears in the event he died tomorrow in Bill's fascinating cavern.

'Bill,' he said, 'I've been thinking of taking Hummingbird to where the other Russian lander once stood, and examining the area.'

'Not tomorrow. We'll be busy tomorrow.'



'I was thinking of going now,' Jim said.

'That should be OK. If you feel up to it.'

'I would like to take Lauren and Gary with me,' Jim added.

'Fine.'

'Do you have any idea what we will find there?'

Bill shrugged. 'A hole in the ground.'

'Yes. And we know what caused that hole.'

Bill nodded. 'I'm sure we're entertaining the same theory.'

'Dmitri Maximov was responsible.' Jim let the sentence trail, hoping Bill would pick it up, and tell him something new. But it was a futile attempt.

'That worries you, I know. It worries me, too.' Bill turned his attention back to Friend's console. 'Tell me what you find. Don't be gone too long.'

Jim stood. 'I'm taking one of the lasers. I might stop at the Karamazov on the way back.'

'Fine. We can't be too careful.'

Jim started down the ladder. When his head was at floor level he stopped and said, 'I was relieved to hear Lauren say that Jessie's blow to the head wasn't serious.'

'So was I.'

Jim had to ask. 'Will she be accompanying us to the underground cavern?'

Bill was taken by surprise. 'What did you say?'

'Jessie. I was wondering if you wanted her to go back down there?'

'Jessie,' Bill whispered. His shoulders sagged, and as they did so, his aura of confidence and strength faltered. The transformation was as startling as it was sudden. Jim took a step back up the ladder.

'Bill?' he asked.

'She's been a great woman,' he said softly. 'I remember the day I met her. It seems like only yesterday. I was at the campus library, studying for a test. She sat across from me at the table and smiled. She said, "Hey, don't I know you?"' Bill stopped and massaged his temples, as if he were getting a headache. He shuddered. ' "Don't I know you."'

Jim began to relax. 'We'll keep her away from that place.'

But Jim's relaxation did not last. The mirrors in the carnival funhouse always had two sides. Bill abruptly turned his back on Jim and repeated stiffly, 'If time permits, everyone will be given an opportunity to go down there.'

It seems like only yesterday.

Jim knew the feeling. 'We'll be back before it gets dark,' he said. He left the control room.

They floated in Hummingbird above a huge snow-veiled crater.

'Looks like a meteor hit here,' Lauren said. 'Are you sure this is the place?'

'There's no doubt in my mind, Doc,' Gary said. 'The lander was sitting at the edge of this cliff. Right, Jim?'

'Yes, this is the spot,' Jim said. 'But take us down, Gary. It's making me dizzy floating above this crater. Land on the east side. We can enjoy the scenery, and watch the sun go down. There are a few things I want to discuss.'

'Out here?' Gary asked. 'Don't you just want to photograph the area and head back? We could talk more

comfortably in the Hawk. I'm still exhausted.'

Lauren yawned. 'Me, too. I've got a splitting headache. I keep wanting to melt some of this snow and have a nice long drink. I wish it wasn't just frozen carbon dioxide.'

'We have to talk,' Jim said. 'About this hole, and other things. Please?'

'Well, sure, Jim,' Gary said. 'You know what made this crater?'

'I think so,' Jim said. 'But take us down first. There's a story I want to tell you both.'

A few minutes later, they sat on three separate red boulders, their backs to Olympus Mons, the evening sun shining pleasantly in their faces. Harsh beauty spread out beneath their feet. A mile-deep chasm sliced the side of the mountain, interrupting an otherwise smooth fifty-mile plunge to the Martian plains. It revealed a geologist's treasure map of changing ages, and had Jim been relaxed, he would have spent hours studying it. But he worried that another age might come to an end if they returned home to Earth the way things were. The age of Man.

'I wish Jenny was here,' Lauren said. 'She always loved beautiful landscapes. Whenever we drove somewhere new and pretty, she would sit by the window, entranced.'

'You miss her a lot?' Jim asked.

'Yeah, I sure do,' Lauren said. 'I miss her more than the Earth itself. But I also feel she's always with me. Terry told me she wanted to stay at the forest by his cabin, because that's the place I love best. Jenny said that I would think of there when I got homesick, and that's been happening. I see her in the woods in my mind, walking in the trees with the sun shining in her long hair.' Lauren paused and frowned. 'But that can't be. It's snowing in Wyoming right now. I'm glad she's there, though. But I would like to hear her voice. Even if only on a tape.'

Jim thought of their severed communications. 'Has Jenny ever spoken to Terry about the ring I gave her?' he asked.

'Yes,' Lauren said. 'She told him to tell you she wears it always.'

Anything else?' Jim asked.

'Not that I know of,' Lauren said. 'Why? I always meant to ask you about that ring.'

'I always meant to tell you about it,' Jim said. 'In fact, the story I referred to is about that ring. It's a rather long tale, but we have time. Would you two like to hear it?'

Gary and Lauren were agreeable. Jim closed his eyes for a moment and let the delightful memory wash clean his mind.

'At the beginning of last June, I took a ten-day leave from our training schedule and traveled to India,' he said. 'Like all of us at the time, I was very excited about going to Mars, but the work was seemingly endless, and I wanted to get away. I'm not sure why I chose India. I've always been fascinated by the country, and I've been there several times, of course, but only in the south. In India, though, wherever you are, the Hindus speak of the Himalayas in the north with superstitious awe. I'd heard so many stories about the great yogis who lived there, who could read minds and levitate, that I figured I just had to have a look.

'I flew into Delhi. The first night I stayed with an old friend of mine - Peter Davidson. He's originally from California, but he had married an Indian woman, and had long been living in her country. He has two sons, Panda and George. I told Peter of my desire to visit the Himalayas, and he was enthusiastic. Unfortunately, he couldn't get away from his classes. He teaches astronomy at the University of Delhi. But Panda and George - one's twenty, the other's nineteen - were out of school. They said they'd

love to be my guides. It seems they had gone on a number of religious pilgrimages to the temples in the Himalayas.

'Five days later found us in Gangotri, a tiny village about two miles above sea level. It's way back in the mountains. By then I'd seen many a temple and met many a sannyasi -the saffron-clad monks who inhabit all of India. I was having a wonderful time. I love to travel, and the people I had spoken to about the Himalayas had been right about the special feeling you find in those mountains. I was not having religious experiences by any stretch of the imagination, but I felt like a kid again. I wanted to see and do everything. I wanted to stay. Still, I hadn't met any yogis who had impressed me as enlightened or possessing supernatural powers. In that respect, I was somewhat disappointed, but I hadn't given up hope.

'I was up early one morning, strolling down the cobblestoned street of Gangotri, when I met a sweet old man. He looked over a hundred. He had been educated in England, at Oxford, and we sat together and talked for hours. He didn't have a tooth in his head, but he did have a habit of breaking into fits of laughter that would last five minutes at a stretch. He was wonderful company.

'He told me about a valley I should visit near the Gaumukh Glacier. The glacier lay only twelve miles northeast of where we were seated, and the valley beneath it was supposed to be filled with flowers of a hundred different varieties. He spoke of it as an enchanted valley, and said many ills could be cured just by walking through it. By the way, the idea of the therapeutic nature of smells was not new to me. In Ayurveda - that's ancient Indian medicine - there are whole sections of text devoted to aromatic cures. The old man told me he had gone for a walk through the valley on his eighty-fifth birthday, when he was about to die, and that had been ten years ago and he was

feeling great. He called the valley Devashan - the dream of the gods.

'I was sold. I dashed back to my room at the ashram and told Panda and George about the valley. They shared my enthusiasm for the trip. Within an hour, toting our camping equipment, we were on our way.

'We made excellent time that day. I told you this was June, and the bridle path we followed was free of snow. My companions were experienced mountaineers. But the sun began to set before we could reach the glacier. We camped that night in a rock hollow just off the path. I remember falling asleep that night with a million stars in the sky. I felt at peace, and I slept deeply.

'The next day we reached Devashan. The old man had been right - it was one uninterrupted sheet of flowers. It stretched for several miles, half a mile below the lip of the glacier. I know it may sound odd, so many blooming flowers so near a bank of icy snow, but the glacier does in fact melt several feet in the summer. Although it was sunny, the valley was still cool.

'I cannot describe the smell of Devashan to you. It saturated the air, but I would be doing a disservice to the place to say I felt smothered in aromas. The air was wonderfully stimulating. I bounded forth into the valley, with Panda and George at my heels. But we might have been too hasty. George stepped on a stone and twisted his ankle. It was not a bad sprain, and there was a nearby stream where he was able to soak it in the cold waters. He did not feel like walking any more that day, though, and his brother wanted to stay behind with him. I told them I would walk just a few miles into the valley and then return. I figured we could camp by the stream where George was soaking his foot. I believed a night's rest was all he needed to recover.

'There was hardly a cloud in the sky as I climbed down into the valley. But after I had been walking less than an hour, the sky suddenly clouded over. Summer storms know a special kind of sorcery in the mountains. When I say suddenly, I mean it. Thunder roared, lightning cracked. I was soaked in seconds. I turned around and started back. Then things started to get interesting.

'Devashan normally had a strong smell. I have already made that point. I can't say the rain actually increased the strength of the odor. It may even have decreased it. However, when the water mixed with the many flowers, it sent different smells into the air. Indeed, I found myself taking in lungfuls of intoxicating aromas. But I use the word intoxicating reluctantly. I didn't feel stoned. In fact, I felt more awake. The sky was a dreary gray, but now the flowers appeared to be glowing. Everything was beautiful, illuminated. I know what you must be thinking. That I had fallen under the influence of a hallucinogenic. I can't argue the point, except to say that it was a hallucinogenic unlike any I have ever read about. It seemed to have no side effects. But now I'm going to totally contradict myself. I couldn't find my way back to Panda and George.'

'Why not?' Lauren asked.

'I don't know,' Jim said.

'Were you walking in circles?' Gary asked.

'No,' Jim said. 'I headed straight back the way I came. The only problem was, when I got to the stream it was gone. So were the guys. The glacier covered the whole area.'

Gary snorted inside his helmet. 'You were stoned.'

Jim smiled. 'If you think that now, wait until I finish my story.' He paused to clear his throat. 'I began to walk south along the glacier. I did not know what to think. By the position of the sun I knew I had not walked to the other end

of the valley by mistake. I could pinpoint it as the clouds began to clear and the rain stopped. Then I really began to wonder what was going on. Devashan is a valley beside a glacier in the Himalayas. Yet it is not surrounded by towering peaks as you might imagine. The region stays between the elevations of nine thousand to eleven thousand feet. That's high, of course, but not for the Himalayas. As the clouds blew away, however, I found myself surrounded by peaks of staggering grandeur. There were literally a dozen of them. What was even more surprising was that I didn't recognize any of them from the maps I had studied. Yes, I know, I was hallucinating, but they were there nevertheless.

'I finally decided to climb a nearby peak to get my bearings. There was a low one not a half mile across the glacier from the valley. I trudged across the ice worrying about Panda and George. I knew they would think I had fallen and injured myself.

'As I worked my way up the side of the peak, I noticed that my watch had stopped. It was a good watch - the rain shouldn't have affected it. Then I saw that it was getting dark. That threw me completely off balance. It had been eleven in the morning when I had left Panda and George and walked into the valley. At worst I figured it must be three or four in the afternoon. But you can't argue with the sun. I spotted a cave and went inside,



planning to spend the night there. Once again, I was not worried about myself. I have been lost many times in my travels, and have always managed to find my way home. The soil on the floor of the cave was soft. The temperature inside was pleasant. I regularly suffer from insomnia, but I curled up inside that cave and fell asleep in seconds.

'When I awoke it was morning. The sun shone directly into the mouth of the cave. I stood and stretched, and it was

then I noticed someone sitting further back in the cave. I hesitated to disturb him. I figured he was a yogi. He was sitting in the lotus position with his spine held perfectly erect. I had been warned in Gangotri never to interrupt a yogi when he was meditating. However, I didn't want to just leave. I was completely lost. I had my canteen, but no food. I was hungry. I took a few steps toward the man.

'He must have heard me coming. I heard a soft intake of breath and saw his eyelashes blink. He glanced over at me. He was far enough back in the cave that the shadows were outdoing the morning sun, but I could see right away how handsome he was. He had long black hair and a long black beard. He appeared to be about twenty-five. Unlike most Indians, he was tall and well-muscled. His skin was also remarkably fair. In fact, I wondered if he was from India at all. Yet I was convinced he was a yogi, although I hadn't spoken a word to him. The feeling that surrounded him was enchanting in its gentleness. He smiled at me and I felt welcome.

'I told him my name and apologized for disturbing his silence. His smile broadened at my words. He answered in a language I did not recognize. That was not a major surprise. India has so many different dialects, a man could go crazy trying to learn them all. I had spoken to him in Hindi, the most common language spoken in the Himalayas, and now I switched to Tamil. Again he answered me in the same peculiar tongue. I puzzled over the melodious nature of his speech. I know a great deal about languages, and his was unlike any I had ever heard before. It was almost as if he were singing a song to me.

'He sat and watched me for a bit, smiling faintly. He wore a dark blue robe. It was wrapped tight at his waist, but hung loose over his shoulders. His feet were bare and heavily callused. His eyes were as black as space. I must tell

you again how beautiful he was. Although I could not understand him, I still felt very much at home with him.

'Finally he rose to his feet. He pointed deeper into the cave, indicating we were to go that way. By chance I had a small flashlight in my back pocket. I took it out and showed him how it worked. He seemed amused. He stepped to a corner of the cave and emerged with two thick wooden sticks that were wrapped at the top with oily cloth. They were obviously torches, but as we walked deeper into the cave, he made no move to light them, relying instead upon my flashlight. You might ask why I started to follow him in the first place. I don't know, I had no other place to go.

'The passage narrowed. It wound sharply and led us downward at a steep angle. The walls were covered with a fine dust. When I scraped it away I found a yellowish marble underneath. Several times we came to spots where we had to duck our heads to get by. Yet on the whole the way was comfortable. The yogi walked on my left, slightly before me. His stride was graceful, and he hardly seemed to breathe. He could have still been in meditation. I know, it's strange - he was leading me far underground. Yet I trusted him. He was so peaceful, and his smile was so warm.

'We walked for over an hour, when I began to notice two things. First, my flashlight was slowly dying. Once more I was puzzled. I knew the batteries were fresh. Also, the temperature was increasing. I removed my jacket and tied the arms around my waist. Even though the yogi spoke to me from time to time, I made no progress in deciphering his language.

'I was in good shape at the time, preparing for this trip to Mars. Perhaps that was the reason why the further we walked and deeper we went, the fresher I felt.

'The flashlight continued to dim. I found myself bumping the walls. Finally the yogi stopped and held up his two torches. In one swift move he smashed the heads together. Immediately they caught fire and burned with a white light. Because of the color of the light, at first I suspected the torch heads were coated with a magnesium powder. I figured the chemical would soon burn away and leave us with ordinary orange flames. Such was not the case. The torches continued to burn white and bright. I was dumbfounded.

'He handed me a torch, and we continued to walk deeper. We could have walked for maybe two hours. The yogi maintained a brisk pace. More and more I began to sense an energy radiating from him. That is a poor choice of words, but it gives you an idea of how vibrant it felt to be in his presence. I also believe the place we were exploring had something to do with how I felt. The silence was uncanny. When we had traveled better than six miles, a quarter of that in the vertical direction, the air underwent a sharp rise in humidity. It got thicker, more satisfying. I smelled a very faint fragrance. It reminded me of camphor. Yes, camphor - the stuff parents rub on the chests of children when they have chest colds. It may very well have been camphor, for all I know.

'Abruptly the wall on our left vanished. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. A few feet later, the ceiling of the cave also disappeared. The yogi now took care that I stayed near the right wall. He didn't want me falling off the edge. I was excited. We had obviously entered a vast underground space. Our torches continued to burn bright, but their light showed nothing beyond the edge of the path.

'My amazement continued to grow. We walked downward for a long time before a floor appeared. To your average geologist, such a large cavern would be considered almost an impossibility. I brushed aside the film of dust on the right wall and discovered the same marble-like

substance, only now it was laced with streaks of clear quartz crystal. The marble material was hard. I tried scratching it with a pocket knife I carried and failed.

'Finally our path leveled as we stepped onto a flat plain. I knelt and examined the ground. It was like a carpet of compressed blue grass, soft and springy.

'We headed away from the path, out over the plain. I must say something about how my perception of the yogi was changing. He still looked the same, naturally, but when I first met him, it was his gentleness that had impressed me. That quality remained, yet it was now overshadowed by a sense of high lineage. What I mean is, now he seemed like a king. Indeed, I felt as if he were taking me on a tour of his kingdom. I could tell he thought of the place as his own.

'After some time we came to a barrier of water. I couldn't tell whether it was a lake or not. I don't think it was a stream; it wasn't flowing in either direction. With the yogi's permission, I stopped and took a long drink. The water tasted faintly of the camphor I mentioned a moment ago. It was not unpleasant. The yogi indicated that we were to swim across. He removed his robe and I stripped down to my shorts. Standing tall in nothing but a loincloth, the yogi looked like a young Greek god. He took my torch as well as his own and waded into the water, holding the fires safely above the surface. He swam using the power of his legs alone, which you know is hard to do. I followed as best I could. The water was warm and clear, although I could not see the bottom.

Soon I felt ground underneath my feet. We climbed onto a silent shore. The yogi handed me my torch and we continued forward. At first the terrain was the same as before - perfectly flat. Then I began to notice shapes in the dark. They appeared to be nothing more than huge boulders. However, as I looked closer, I believed I saw subtle shapes. You might ask, did I see carvings or not? I tell you, I'm not sure. Being an archaeologist, I was tempted to think I had been led to the ruins of an ancient civilization. But the boulders might just have been boulders. I know that's not a satisfactory answer, but it's an honest one. Everywhere I found the same marble-like material I had seen in the cave, only now it was free of dust and it was whiter, and laced with greater amounts of quartz crystal. Yet, once again, I could not conclusively say I was examining anything that had been fashioned by human hand.

'Eventually we came to an oval pool of water. It was large and symmetrical. I forgot to mention earlier that while we were undressing to swim across the water, my companion indicated that I should bring my canteen. Standing at the edge of the oval pool, he took the canteen from me and emptied its contents on the ground. He submerged it in the pool until the canteen was full. Then he replaced the cap and handed it back to me. I made a move to drink from the pool, for I was thirsty again, but he stopped me and shook his head. I was surprised. I gathered from his gestures that I wasn't to drink the water in my canteen, either.

'When he shook his head, it was the first specific gesture that showed he knew anything of modern culture. But upon reflection, I think he had learned the gesture in our short acquaintance. I had the impression he understood everything I said to him, but that he didn't have the means to answer me. I guess it was the way he smiled at me.

'We walked around the pool. I was curious to know its depth, but when I reached down to feel for the bottom, he gently restrained me. I got the idea that the pool was sacred. I found the whole place fascinating, but my biggest surprise was yet to come.

'On the far side of the pool was a block of marble. It was flawlessly white and literally a perfect cube. Resting on top of it was a single silver ring. The yogi indicated I should pick it up.

'The ring's appearance was remarkably ordinary. True, it was exquisitely polished, but its design was plain - a simple silver band. I placed it on my finger, half expecting something extraordinary to happen. We've all read fantasy stories about magical rings and the wonderful powers they give to those who possess them. I guess being where I was, I believed those stories could come true. Of course I felt no different with the ring on.

'But new understanding did come to me then. Constantly, while examining the strangely shaped stones, I looked for evidence of an ancient civilization. Now that I held the ring, I had such proof, although it was far from conclusive. The yogi could simply have put it on top of the marble block. He could have shaped the block for that matter. But in either case, I began to see the cavern in a new light, not as being incredibly old, but as being incredibly young, not yet born. Does that sound strange? I know it must. But in the square block I began to imagine a sculptured table, as if in the future it would be that way. I could see the boulders that lined the pool as being pillars in a grand palace. The springy turf we had been walking over would be blooming grass, even bushes and trees. I got quite carried away with myself.

'The yogi indicated that I should keep the ring. Then he pointed to the torches, which had finally begun to dim. He gestured in the direction we had come. I protested. I wanted to look further. But then I imagined what it would be like to explore the cavern without light. I agreed we should go back.

'There is little to say about our return journey. We

retraced our steps at a good pace. At what I estimated to be sea level, my flashlight began to work again. I imagined that in the place I had just visited, twenty-first-century technology didn't operate. To this day I think of the cavern as belonging to a separate time, a different reality, with its own laws of nature.

"The sun was high in the sky when we arrived at the mouth of the cave. I had walked far, but felt little fatigue. In fact, I wasn't even hungry anymore. The yogi pointed toward the valley of flowers. He indicated I should walk the length of it to get back to where I was supposed to be. He was such wonderful company - I did not want to leave. I asked if I could come back and visit him again. He shook his head and pointed at the sky. I know the gesture could have been interpreted in a number of ways, but at the time I had no doubt that he understood I was going to Mars. He hugged me, touching me briefly between the eyebrows, and then walked back into the cave. I never saw him again.

'In a dream I walked the length of the valley of flowers. It rained on me again, the storm coming out of nowhere. Eventually the scenery began to make sense and I found the stream where I had left Panda and George. But I did not find them, not until I reached Gangotri a couple of days later. They were much relieved to see I was all right. They said they had searched for me, and when they didn't find me, they thought our paths had crossed and that I had returned to Gangotri ahead of them. They wanted to know where I had been all this time, but for some reason I didn't tell them. I just said I had gotten lost. I did try to find the old sannyasi who had told me about Devashan, however. I thought I might tell him of my adventure. But he must have left town. Sannyasis are always wandering from one place to another.

'Panda and George had to return to their family and I let

them go. Despite what the yogi had said about my not seeing him again, I wanted to go back. I pored over maps in Gangotri. A lot of good it did me. I couldn't find any of the peaks I had seen near the yogi's cave. Still, I returned to Devashan and hiked up and down the valley three times looking for signs of the place. I looked and looked. If it had not been for the ring in my pocket, I might have believed I had imagined the whole episode. I guess it goes without saying that I didn't find the cave. What was I to do? My vacation was almost up. I was going to Mars soon. I returned to the States, excited about what I had discovered, but also frustrated that its mystery had been left unsolved.

'Back in Houston I performed a number of tests on the ring. I tried to scratch it with a diamond and failed. I subjected it to an electron scan and found it to be a perfect circle, and I mean perfect. I dipped the ring in concentrated acids and got no reaction. By this time I knew it wasn't silver or gold. Finally I put it under the laser they have at the University. I was scared to do it, but I also had a peculiar faith in the magic of the ring. I set the laser at full power and pushed the button. It didn't do a thing to it. Let me impress upon you how extraordinary a fact that is. Nothing known to man could have withstood such a concentration of energy.

'I've already commented on the ring's shine. That shine never fades. I've never had to polish it. Occasionally the ring even appears to shine in the dark. But that may be merely my imagination.'

Jim paused once more. The sun was setting. The canyon beneath them was falling into long shadows. It was difficult for Jim to watch the sun going down and convince himself that it was the same sun that set on Earth.

'Well, that's my story,' he said finally. 'I've talked for a

while. You've been good listeners. I suppose now you must have questions. I assure you, I won't be offended if you don't believe a thing I've said. Sometimes I wonder myself if it wasn't just a dream. But then, you've seen the ring too, Lauren.'

'Why did you give the ring to Jenny?' Lauren asked.

'I did it on the spur of the moment,' Jim said. 'I've always adored your sister. I thought she would like to have it.'

'How many people have you told about this?' Gary asked.

'Only you two.'

'Are you sure the laser was on high power?' Gary asked.

'Yes. Full power. It didn't even heat the ring.'

'That's impossible,' Gary said. 'What could it have been made of?'

Jim shook his head. 'Nothing known to man.'

'What did you do with the canteen of water?' Gary asked.

'I took it home to the States in a sealed bottle. It's in a box at my apartment in Houston. I never drank any of it.'

Lauren peered at him closely. 'Why did you tell us this story?' she asked. 'Why did you tell us now?'

'To prepare you,' Jim said.

'For what?' Lauren asked.

Jim hesitated, unsure of how to explain himself. The reasons were unclear in his own mind. He wanted to give Lauren and Gary a sense for the supernatural, and open their minds to things they never considered. He knew they respected him; they seemed to believe his story, and had certainly been moved by it. But he knew he had to be careful



about speaking directly. Gary was easily suggestible. Jim had watched him reading his books. Gary would be genuinely scared at the tense parts, would laugh at the humorous spots, and would grow angry at the villains. He

was remarkably innocent given his heavy responsibilities. He was also impulsive, and extremely protective of Lauren. Jim knew Gary would blow Bill's head off if he told him everything he was thinking.

Lauren was different. She was the most intuitive woman Jim had ever met, sensitive to feelings in others few would have noticed. Her intelligence and resourcefulness were obvious to everyone. Yet she had a hard-headed side that categorized everything as either black or white. To say what he wanted, he needed to move through a sea of gray. He didn't know how she would react.

'Did you know that we've lost contact with the Nova?' Jim asked.

'Shit,' Gary said. 'Is it the generators?'

'I don't think so,' Jim said.

'What then?' Lauren asked.

'I'm not positive,' Jim said, 'but I have theories. That is why I told you my story, to make my theories more acceptable to you two. Where should I begin? You asked about this hole where the Russian ship is supposed to be. What do you think caused it, Gary?'

'There must have been an explosion of some kind. But then there should be signs of wreckage, even with the snow here. It confuses me. Even if all their fuel exploded at once, it couldn't have made this size hole. But I know that ship landed here. I'm sure of it.'

'Do you have any theories, Lauren?' Jim said.

'No.'

'I'll tell you what happened,' Jim said. 'Coming to Mars, we knew there was always a chance we might catch an alien disease. Especially in light of how the Russians disappeared. Now an infection, as Lauren well knows, can be subtle. You can have a disease and not know it. In fact, you can have a disease that produces obvious symptoms and still not know that you're sick. The disease could be such that it makes you incapable of thinking you're ill. Am I right, Lauren?'

Her tone was cautious. 'In rare cases, yes.'

'The possibility existed when we set out for Mars that we could catch such a disease. How great the chances were, no one could say for sure. But look at what was at stake - the lives of five billion people. Every precaution had to be taken that we didn't return to Earth with an infection. In the Soviet Union they followed similar reasoning. The Russian ships were equipped with devices that could completely destroy any infection.'

'What devices?' Lauren asked.

'The Karamazov, the orbiting Gorbachev, and the lander we have been unable to locate, all carry or carried thermonuclear war heads.'

'Jesus!' Gary exclaimed. 'That's what made this hole. Wait a second. How do you know that the Russian ships have bombs aboard?'

'I assume that they do,' Jim said. 'I'm certain I'm right. It explains this hole. And, you see, we have a similar warhead aboard the Hawk.'

'What?' Gary cried.

'Tell me you're kidding,' Lauren said.

'We have a warhead,' Jim said. 'Bill and I have known about it since before we left. If at any time we feel we have caught an unusual infection, we are to contact Houston. They will study the disease, as we will study it here. But even if our symptoms disappear, we are never to return home. We could be carriers. The danger would be too great.'

'We're just supposed to blow ourselves up?' Lauren asked.

'Yes,' Jim said.

'Why wouldn't they just let us die here?' Lauren asked. 'Why the bomb?'

'The bomb is there in the event that some of us want to return and some don't,' Jim said.

'Where is it?' Gary asked.

'In the basement - in the garage. It's well shielded. I don't know exactly how powerful it is.'

'Are you saying the Russians used their bomb,' Lauren asked 'and killed themselves intentionally?'

'Yes,' Jim said. 'More specifically, I think Commander Dmitri Maximov detonated it. Only the top two ranks of our crew knew about the Hawk's bomb. I imagine the Russians would have followed a similar procedure. Ivan was second in command. We know he didn't trigger it.'

'Why didn't NASA tell me?' Lauren asked. 'I'm the doctor.'

'You're also the youngest,' Jim said. 'It's very difficult to push a button that you know will kill you.'

'I see,' Lauren said. 'So you feel Dmitri was convinced his crew was contaminated, and that he tried to stop the infection before it could spread to Earth?'

'Yes,' Jim said.

Gary sighed. He said it for all of them. 'That means we probably have the same disease. And that we can never go home.' There was a silence. The sun had set. Their own personal night was about to begin, Jim thought. It would be long. He spoke gently. 'Not necessarily. Perhaps this infection is localized, and spreads only through a specific mechanism.'

'There is something wrong with this whole theory,' Lauren said. 'How could Carl have caught the disease?'

'Yeah,' Gary said. 'And if Ivan was infected with this disease, and didn't give a damn about the Earth, why didn't he try to return in the KaramazovT

'I will answer your question first, Gary,' Jim said. 'I think Dmitri sabotaged the Karamazov. That way he could lure all his crew to the other lander and blow them up. But Ivan must have been wary, and not fallen for the trap. That is my belief.'

'But what about Carl?' Lauren insisted. 'He never came down here. He couldn't have caught anything.'

'Are you sure?' Jim asked softly. The time had come to spill his heart.

'There is no germ that can cross two hundred miles of empty space,' Lauren said.

Jim sighed. He knew it would all sound so crazy. He had to ask himself if he hadn't already caught something. 'The disease that infects this planet isn't physical,' he said.

'Huh?' Gary said.

'What do you mean?' Lauren asked anxiously.

'Hear me patiently, and with an open mind. Tourists in Western Europe often comment on the difference in the air when they cross from one country to the next, even just at the border. You walk a few feet, and even if your eyes are closed, you still know you're in a different country. People who travel report this all the time. But why? Is the reason psychological? That's a catch-all phrase that says nothing. I believe it's a perception of non-physical influences. These influences must exist. We don't have to - we shouldn't - delve into psychic phenomena to find them. They represent the most intimate aspects of our lives. We have hopes and dreams and thoughts. None of these could be located or explained by a physicist. There is an entire universe of forces we cannot perceive with our senses, or with any instrument man can build. Nevertheless, these forces exist, along with their effects. I have spent decades prowling through old ruins, and digging up the past. Often, sitting alone in those places late at night, I came to know the

people who once lived there; what they were like, whether they were a proud people, a happy people, or a miserable and vicious people. Life is a mysterious thing. It has a quality that doesn't necessarily die when a people dies. Two miles beneath the Himalayas, I felt life. I felt goodness. Here there is another kind of power, a power that goes on and on, that never stops.'

'What the fuck are you talking about?' Lauren asked.

'A power,' Jim repeated, mostly to himself. 'Death. This planet is dead. But it does not rest easily. It is envious of us. It's trying to infect us.' He stopped himself. He hadn't meant to get so esoteric.

'Are you talking about Ivan?' Gary asked, confused.

Jim shook his head. 'I doubt if he can be put back together. But he could never have lived here for two years. We all know that. Why don't we face it?'

'Face what?' Lauren asked, sounding annoyed.

'Oh shit,' Gary said, burying his face in his hands. 'My nightmares are bad enough as they are.'

Jim nodded. 'We've all been having nightmares. We don't talk about them, though, and they never really scare us, not enough to drive us away. Quite the opposite. They add to the fascination of this planet. Many things do. Impressions in the sand that begin to look like footprints -if you look long enough. Canals that flow only underground, but canals that can still be seen from millions of miles away in a telescope if you look long enough. A cosmonaut who closes every window in his ship and then gouges out his eyes so that he won't have to look at Mars, so he won't have to see what Mars is doing to him. And what was Mars doing to him? It must have been something incredible, because when this

same cosmonaut cut his throat, his blood didn't freeze, not even after floating around in a gigantic icebox for two years. Then there is the

other cosmonaut who lives quite comfortably in an icebox for two years. But none of this makes you run away. You want to stay and investigate the mysteries. You're curious, of course, and you're also afraid if you don't figure things out, then the danger will remain, and wait for another day, another time.'

'Why don't we get out of here, Jim?' Gary asked suddenly, scared.

'None of this makes any sense,' Lauren protested. 'You can't get infected by something that doesn't physically exist. How could you?'

'I don't know,' Jim said. 'Yet.'

'I'm not curious,' Gary said. 'Let someone else find out what's happening. Let's just get the fuck out of here.'

'We can't,' Jim said.

'Why not?' Gary demanded. 'I can have us ready to blast off in half an hour.'

Jim took a breath. 'Because of Bill.'

'Talk to him,' Gary said. 'Tell him we're in danger of catching whatever the hell you're talking about. He respects you. He'll listen.'

'No,' Lauren said softly, deadly. 'That's not what you meant, is it, Jim? You're saying Bill's like Ivan.'

'No,' Jim said quickly.

'Yes, you are!' Lauren snapped. 'You've just been leading up to the fact that you think he has to be killed. Well, it's all bullshit. If anyone's been infected, it's you.'

'Lauren,' Jim said softly, 'he was down there too long. His air should have run out. At best, I was hoping to find his body.'

'You're not sure!' Lauren cried. 'He could have had extra tanks.'

Gary shook his head at the ground. 'Oh, shit. Oh, shit.'

'I checked his supplies before he left,' Jim said. 'I know

exactly how much air he brought with him. It was a lot, but not enough to be down there as long as he was.'

'I don't believe you!' Lauren yelled.

"Then why are you so upset?" Jim asked.

Lauren was on the verge of tears. 'Because I love you, Jim. I trust you. I don't want you saying things.' She bowed her head and clenched her gloved hands. 'I can't rest here.'



When I sleep, I feel like I can't breathe, like I'm smothering. I have these nightmares of something horrible climbing on top of me.' She coughed. 'He was trying to drag me into that water. He was so strong. No one that skinny could be so strong. And he just came out of the water. He was waiting in the water.' She closed her eyes and her cheek twitched. 'I keep asking myself how he could have been in that water. His suit wouldn't have worked. It's impossible. You know, I didn't want to cut him in half, but he wouldn't let go of me. Then, when I shot him, he was still grinning at me. He was dead and he was still grinning at me.'

Gary put his arm around Lauren. 'No one's going to get you again like that, Doc,' he said. He looked at Jim. 'You really think Bill's like Ivan? If he is, he's dead, and I'm sorry. We're not taking any fucking zombie back home with us.'

'No,' Jim said. 'Lauren's right. We're not sure about anything. My whole theory could be insane. How do I know I'm not sick? I'm sure Bill thinks he's perfectly well. And he's different from Ivan. I asked him about Jessie, and by the way he responded I could tell he still loves her. I doubt if the Ivan we met loved anybody.' Jim stood and looked in the direction of Olympus Mons. 'We need more facts. Tomorrow Bill wants to show me the big secret under the ground. I'll go with him. But I think I'll insist that Jessie come along. There could be safety in her company. As a further safeguard, we'll say the laser we brought with us

accidentally fell into the canyon and was lost. We'll hide it near the Karamazov in case either of you need it. I'm also going to give you both the code to the warhead. It can be triggered through Friend. But I believe Bill has manipulated the computer's programs. I think that's why our communications are out. I fear they're gone for good. But the bomb can be detonated manually. I'll explain the details on the way back. I pray it doesn't come to that. But you know one thing above all else: Earth must be protected.'

They walked back to Hummingbird in silence. But climbing into the hovercraft, Lauren spoke up. 'Your cavern in India reminds me of the one Bill's found.'

'They are much alike,' Jim agreed.

She suddenly gripped his arm. 'I know why you told us that story,' she said. 'You think there's a reason why you discovered that ring.'

Jim smiled. 'Your sister always reminded me of Cinderella. Maybe the yogi wanted Jenny to finally receive her glass slipper.'

Lauren was not smiling. 'Say it to me straight. What do you think's going on here?'

Jim thought for a moment. 'I said this infection is alien, but it reminds me of legends on Earth, of ghost stories.' He paused. 'I think this planet's haunted.'

## TWENTY-THREE

The press room was crowded. Along with twenty other reporters, Terry Hayes waited for Dean Ramsey to make a statement on the fate of Project Nova. The public had heard nothing from Mars for two days, not since Colonel William Brent, Professor James Ranoth, and Dr Lauren Wagner had gone to inspect the Karamazov.

'Here comes the asshole now,' Tom Brenner, Terry's partner, said in his ear. Flanked by two Air Force officers, Ramsey emerged from a pair of swinging doors at the side of the stage. Everybody stood. They were tense; the whole country was nervous. The word on the streets said that Mars had Martians after all, and that they weren't friendly. Terry wasn't sleeping well. Ramsey didn't look as if he was, either.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Ramsey began gravely. 'I'm sorry to keep you waiting. My statement is brief. We are no longer in contact with the Hawk.' There was a hush. 'We do not know yet the reason for the break in communications. We suspect a power loss due to a malfunction in their generators. It was such that caused the initial break. Questions?'

All the reporters spoke at once, except Terry. His partner had the loudest voice. 'When did this difficulty start?' Tom Brenner asked.

'Mark Kawati - on board the Nova - was unsuccessful in raising them six hours ago,' Ramsey said.

'But we've had no direct report from the Hawk in two days,' The Associated Press said.

'The blanket of silence has been for reasons of national security,' Ramsey said. 'I cannot elaborate at this time.'

'Did they inspect the Karamazov before the break?' the Associated Press asked.

'Yes,' Ramsey said. 'They found nothing. The ship was intact but empty.'

'No bodies?' CBS asked.

'The Karamazov was empty,' Ramsey said.

'Why the blanket of silence?' several people asked again.

'For reasons of national security,' Ramsey said. 'I'm afraid I can't be specific at this time.'

'Is it true that the president is flying into Houston at this time?' Tom Brenner asked.

'No,' Ramsey said.

'There have been rumors that there was actually a survivor aboard the Karamazov," Tom Brenner said.

'Those rumors are absolutely false,' Ramsey said.

'How can you be sure the generators are responsible for the communication failure?' the New York Times asked.

'We suspect their generators,' Ramsey said. 'We're not sure.'

'Is the crew in any danger?' the Associated Press asked.

'No immediate danger,' Ramsey said.

'What does that mean?' Tom Brenner asked.

'The loss of communications will not prevent the crew from rendezvousing with the Nova,' Ramsey said.

'Why don't they leave Mars now?' Tom Brenner asked. 'From your last statement, we understood that their water supply was destroyed.'

'They're continuing with their program of exploration,' Ramsey said. 'Their water supply isn't critical yet.'

'How do you know that, if you've lost communications?' the New York Times asked.

'We've only been out of contact for six hours,' Ramsey said.

'What was the crew doing at that time?' CBS asked.

'Resting. Sleeping.'

'Six hours ago would have been in the middle of the afternoon in the Tharsis region,' Tom Brenner said.

Ramsey hesitated. 'They were up late the night before -exploring.'

'They were exploring in the dark?' Tom Brenner asked.

'Because of their low supply of water,' Ramsey said, 'they've been trying to make the best use of their time.'

'You just said their water supply wasn't critical,' Tom Brenner said. 'Why were they exploring in the dark?'

'They've had a change in program,' Ramsey said.

'There have been reports that they've caught an alien virus and gone insane,' ABC said.

"Those reports are absolutely false,' Ramsey said.

'How could there be a threat to our national security, unless there were survivors aboard the Karamazov?' Tom Brenner said.

'There were no survivors,' Ramsey said. He took a breath. He knew he'd come off badly. 'I'm sorry, that's all the questions I can take at this time. When we re-establish contact, we'll let you know. Now if you'll excuse me.. .'He backed away from his microphone. Tom Brenner nudged Terry.

'Ask about Lauren,' Tom said.

'He just said he doesn't know anything,' Terry said.

'Do you believe him?'

'Of course not.'

'Ask,' Tom insisted. 'You're her fiancé. He knows that. Quick!'

'Hey, Dean!' they called. He and Tom were in the second row, in the center. Ramsey heard him, the whole room did, and another hush swept across the crowd as Ramsey paused at the exit and turned.

'Yes, Mr Hayes?' he said without the benefit of his mike.

Terry tried to smile, and didn't quite make it. 'I was just wondering, you know, if Lauren is all right. I mean, I heard what you said, but she's my fiancée and I'd really like to know. We could keep it off the record.'

Ramsey did not simply look as if he had been losing sleep with the rest of them. He looked as if he could have had a terminal disease - a tumor that swelled every time he told a lie. But Terry could see it hurt Ramsey even more to tell the truth. What the man did was tell him nothing at all.

'When we re-establish contact, Terry,' Ramsey said, 'we'll let you know.'

Ramsey left. The reporters began to disperse. Tom Brenner ushered Terry out of the press room and down a long hall that led seemingly nowhere. Tom talked a mile a minute.

'Have you ever seen such an inept snow job? Here the whole world's watching the greatest exploration in human history and NASA drops the curtain just when things get exciting. And that bullshit about national security. First the crew is dying of thirst, and now it's "not critical." Never mind that they're sleeping in the middle of the day, because they've been out all night exploring. If you ask me, they've found a couple of Russians and they don't know what to do with them.' He paused. 'Hey, Terry, I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to listen to my mouth at a time like this. I'm sure Lauren's all right. NASA's probably still in contact with the Hawk. They probably just concocted the whole story.'

'Why would they do that?' Terry asked.

'Why did they go to Mars in the first place? Hell if I know. They probably just don't want to upset how good things are going with the Russians. When you get right down to it, that's all that matters to these people. Ramsey was lying through his teeth.'

Terry nodded. 'I hope you're right.' He veered toward a door that would take him into the front lobby, where Kathy Johnson was waiting.

'Hey, where are you going?' Tom asked. 'We've got to get a story into the office by ten. The boss dislikes our coverage as it is. You especially have to be careful, Terry. He still hates the fact that Lauren got engaged to you after she wouldn't even go out with him.'

'I need to tell a friend what Ramsey said,' Terry said. 'Tell the boss to go fuck himself if he complains about me.'

'Yeah, I told him that for you yesterday. But you know he's a Christian. He didn't understand how he was supposed to do it.' Tom regarded him closely. 'You look like hell. Fuck the story. It'll just depress the community if we write it. Why should they have to read shit like that? Go home and get some rest, Terry.'

'Yeah, I might do that.'

Tom squeezed his arm. 'Lauren will come home. I know it.'

Terry smiled faintly. 'Thanks.'

They parted company and Terry went out and searched the lobby for Kathy. He couldn't find her. Ramsey had been an hour late with his statement. He figured she might have gone to the cafeteria for coffee, and headed that way himself.

But waiting for an elevator to take him up to the



cafeteria, he thought of Jennifer, and a strong desire to talk to her swept over him. He missed her almost as much as Lauren; she was almost as hard to get hold of. He hurried to a phone booth and dialed the cabin. The blank screen dissolved and was filled with a blazing fire, a snow-lined window, a cozy living room, and the face of a beautiful young girl half hidden behind a wave of blond hair. Jennifer sat with her profile to the screen, her expression sad. She didn't even look over to see who it was. He supposed she didn't have to.

'Hello, Terry,' she said.

'Jenny. How are you? We haven't talked for a while.'

'I'm fine. I sit by the fire.'

He felt an urge to take her in his arms and shield her from what was happening on Mars. Still, he felt she should know what was going on with her sister.

'It must be cold there,' he said. 'That's a big fire you've got going.'

'It's cold,' she said.

'Jenny,' he began reluctantly. 'I've got some bad news for you. It has to do with Lauren.' Jennifer didn't react. He continued, 'NASA has lost contact with the Hawk. Now this happened before. Remember when they landed the second time? It may not be that serious. Personally, I don't think it is. It's probably just a minor power failure. Their generators have acted up before.'

Jennifer didn't move or speak, or look his way. Terry could have understood a multitude of reactions, but not this. He wasn't even sure she had heard him.

'She should be all right,' he went on. 'They only lost contact six hours ago. Not that I really know what Lauren's been doing the last two days. They started censoring her reports when she went to inspect the Russian ship.'

'The Russians,' Jennifer whispered. She raised her right

hand and fingered the ring Professor Ranoth had given her. It shone bright in the light of the fire.

'Are you OK, Princess?' Terry asked desperately.

Jennifer lowered her head. 'I told her not to go,' she said, closing her eyes. 'What does it matter what I say?'

The conversation wasn't doing a thing for Terry's morale. 'Are you still working on your story?' he asked.

'No.'

'Are you taking a break?'

'The story is finished. I came to the end.'

'Great,' Terry said. 'I'm anxious to read it.'

'I suppose you will.'

'You know,' Terry said, trying to sound enthusiastic, 'Lauren will be on her way back soon. Once she's up in the Nova, and asleep, I can take another week off. I'll come see you. We can make a big snowman and blow its head off with Daniel's rifle. We'll be together soon. We'll...' He stopped. Tears were rolling over Jennifer's cheeks. 'Jenny?'

She shook her head slightly. 'No.'

'I'll come. I promise. I'll be there soon.'

She spoke to the wall of his cabin, in a whisper. 'You always took good care of us. Lauren thinks about you a lot. She wants to come home.'

'She will' he said gently. 'She's fine. We'll all be together soon. It'll be like old times.'

Jennifer wiped at her tears and sighed. 'Old times, lots of time.' She held up the ring and admired it in the warm orange light. 'I finished the story, but it's getting cold, Terry. I think the fire's going out.' For the first time, she turned and stared at him, and although it was the most extraneous of thoughts, he couldn't help marveling how clear and blue her eyes looked in that moment. They were so perfect they didn't look human. 'From the beginning,'

she said sadly, 'it was my fault.' She reached to cut the line. 'Goodbye, Terry. I will remember you.'

'Wait! Jenny?'

The screen went dead. Terry sat in the booth for a long time.

## TWENTY-FOUR

The darkness reeked of the stench of the ancient altar where the black priest cut out the heart of the living. Jim had been to such places before, in his travels on Earth, and now he was here again. He never really understood why there was always a new god that needed a sacrifice. It seemed a recurring pattern.

Would he be afraid when his turn came?

The three of them stood in the perpetual night of the Martian deep. The top of the hill Bill had spoken of, at the center of the island, was flat; it came nowhere near the ceiling of the cavern. They had made excellent time on the journey underground. Hummingbird had swept them through the cave, past their anchored boat, and over the miles of icy water to the island. All to land here, Jim thought. Next to a hole in the ground that remained black even when a light was shone directly into it.

The material of horror. A hole without a bottom.

Jessica herself had insisted on coming. There had been no need for Jim to press Bill on the matter. Unfortunately, Bill was now telling her she had to stay with Hummingbird. There are things down there, my dear, that can't be touched except by an expert like our Professor. Jim was struck by the sincerity in Bill's voice. Of course, that had been the

problem good men faced whenever they wished to directly confront an evil; it usually had an associated virtue that made the good men hesitate. No, they would say, we cannot kill them. They are God's creatures. Jim wondered if he hadn't made a serious mistake. Courage was certainly not one of the evil's virtues on this occasion. The laser Jim carried had been overloaded and had burned out the previous night, while it was supposed to be recharging. Friend's broken circuits could have accidentally caused the damage, but who really believed that?

Not me. Not Bill. Probably not even Friend.

Jim was glad he had told Lauren and Gary to hide a laser near the Karamazov. He had done little else for them.

Jessica agreed at last to stay with Hummingbird. Bill told Jim that it was best they start down. Goodbye, Jessie, Jim said, keep an eye open.

Jim followed Bill into the pit. The way was more of a drop than a slope, and Jim had to fight to keep his footing. The loose ground covered his boots like oily mud. It made him feel dirty. He knew one thing for sure. No angel walked by his side on this journey.

The outside temperature increased sharply. Even inside his suit, Jim felt the heat on his skin. A sober red light began to glow up ahead. A foul smell breathed inside his head. His thoughts were unpleasant. Fire and brimstone, and a place where the damned souls of a cursed people were sent when they were through tormenting the good guys. Except here they were never through. Yeah, he recognized the place. He had read enough stories about it.

At last Jim understood just what it meant to be on the planet Mars. He was afraid.

On the threshold of an entrance into a place of burning pools, Bill paused and turned to Jim. Bill smiled, but the expression was a mere movement of the mouth, and did not touch his eyes. Jim could hardly bear to look at his eyes. There was nothing there.

'Coming in?' Bill asked.

They always invite you in.

Jim had led a full life, yet suddenly regrets rose up inside him. Three stood out sharply. He would have liked to laugh with Gary and Lauren again. He would have liked to feel an ocean breeze on his face one more time. And most of all, he would have loved a final talk with Jennifer Wagner. He had given the glass slipper to the right person, he was sure of that. But now he would never know whether the ring was magical or not. Only she could have told him.

'Yes,' Jim said. He stepped forward. He knew he wasn't going to find his way home this time.

The snow crunched softly under Lauren's feet as she strode across the bleak Martian plateau towards the Karamazov. The sky was a depressing sheet of clouds. A quarter mile more and she would reach the Russian lander. She was alone. Gary remained in the Hawk, trying to maintain the illusion with Bill that everything was cool. Lauren had spoken to Bill for only a moment this morning, and she knew things were not cool. He didn't have Ivan's wicked grin, but he had Ivan's eyes, and that was bad enough.

She had only remembered Dmitri's diary this morning, after the others had left. Gary had been furious with her.

'Damn you, Doc, how could you have forgotten that?'

'The second I found it, a corpse jumped me!'

'Well, go get it.'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'By myself?'

' You're the one who doesn't think anything weird is going on. What are you afraid of?'

A lot of things, Lauren thought. She checked her watch. They would have reached the island by now. God, Jim had better be all right. She would never be able to live with herself if something happened to him. Last night she had talked Gary out of accompanying him. I love Jim, but you'd be the only one I'd have left. Big brave Dr Wagner was turning out to be a coward, after all.

Lauren reached the "ladder that led to the door of the Karamazov. She had to stop to catch her breath. Her throat felt like an abandoned gold mine. Her lips were cracked, and she could taste her own blood. They had drunk the last of their water for breakfast this morning. Soon, they would have to find something else to drink.

But she knew they dare not touch the canal water, not without a complete analysis of the liquid. It was remarkable, since they had discovered the canal, they had not had a chance to perform even the most rudimentary of experiments on the water. She blamed that fucking Ivan -he had kept them dancing since he had first opened his frog eyes. But she was still kicking herself for not having returned with a water sample after they had rescued Bill.

Lauren climbed to the platform outside the airlock. Jim had left the outer seal open; there was no need for codes. She stepped inside and the door shut behind her. Soon she was in the Karamazov's dark laboratory, holding tight to her flashlight. She saw a tall frozen beaker of blood. The Russian doctor must have been searching for evidence of infection. He had drawn an awful lot of blood, though, more than he could possibly have needed.

Thirsty, Lori.

Lauren left the laboratory and took the ladder to the second floor. Black was still playing black on the chessboard. She stepped to the sleeping chamber where she had found Ivan. She reminded herself of what Jim had said about Ivan, that he was gone for good. Hurrying, she searched the floor for the diary and found it near Dmitri's desk. She was anxious to leave, but the commander's family photo made her stop. A tear came into her eye as she picked it up and stared at the happy faces. She made a promise to herself to write them as soon as she got home.

Then Lauren caught sight of a glass sitting on a small table by the bed where she had uncovered Ivan. It could have been a glass of water or juice that a man would keep by his bed in case he got thirsty during the night. Only this glass was full of red liquid. Lauren took a step closer, telling herself she was not seeing what was before her eyes. But she was a doctor, and it was hard to lie to herself about a glass full of blood.

Lauren felt sick to her stomach. She picked up the glass and then began to tremble. The temperature was below freezing, and the blood was still in liquid form.

It's impossible. It's blood, just blood.

Something must have been added to it to keep it from freezing. Or maybe all it had taken was the touch of Ivan's lips.

'No,' she moaned. 'No.'

Dmitri's family photo slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. The glass of blood landed on it a moment later, shattering the photo's plate glass and splashing Dmitri's children a gruesome red. Clasp the diary to her bosom, Lauren turned and fled. She had to get outside and into the light. She had to get to Jim and warn him he was right about the planet being haunted.



Lauren raced back to the Hawk with her radio off, afraid Bill might be listening. She waved to Gary in the control

room as she approached the ship. A few minutes later she stood gasping in the airlock while the pressure equalized around her. Finally the green light above the entrance door flashed on. She stumbled into the basement and ripped off her helmet. Gary helped her from behind with her suit; she didn't see his face at first. But when she did see it, she knew she was too late. A horrible weakness sagged her knees and she thought she would fall. But she spoke anyway, as if there was hope left.

'Gary, I found something in the Karamazov. It was horrible. We've got to get to Jim. What he suspects is true. It's worse than true. We've got to tell him...' She stopped. Gary's expression was blank. She shook her head. 'No, Gary?'

He leaned against the wall, the last bit of color drained from his face. 'I've got bad news, Lori.'

'Jim?' she whispered. Tears fell from her cheeks, and she fell with them, although she never hit the floor.

'Jessie called a few minutes ago,' Garry said. 'They're bringing him back now.'

'Bringing him back? What does that mean?'

What could it mean?

Gary rested his head on the airlock door. "They're bringing back his body," he said.

Terry Hayes awoke with the alarm screaming in his ear. He had hated alarms ever since he was a child, when they jarred him back to a reality where he would have to get up and go to school where nothing of any interest ever happened. He groped for the clock, wanting to break it with his fist. But even when he whacked it onto the floor, it continued to yell. He sat up and opened his eyes. It was dark. He checked his clock - four in the morning. Then he realized it was the phone that had awakened him. Terry didn't like four-in-the-morning calls. They were never happy ones. He picked it up reluctantly.

'Hello?'

'Is this Terry Hayes?'

His heart was thumping. 'Yeah.'

'Terry? This is Stephen Floyd.'

That was Daniel Floyd's older brother.

'Is it Jenny?' Terry asked. 'Has something happened to Jenny?'

A forever pause. 'Yes,' Stephen Floyd said.

'Has she been in an accident? Is she at the hospital?'

'Terry, I don't know how to say this.'

'She's dead,' Terry said, knowing he spoke the truth.

'I'm sorry,' Stephen Floyd said. 'I'm very sorry.'

Terry closed his eyes. He thought of the phrase: the light of my life. It was such a fucking stupid line. Yet, as far as he was concerned, it had been true about Jennifer. Because now it was so dark inside his head he could have been the one who was dead.

'How did it happen?' Terry asked.

'There was a fire at your cabin. No, it was in the shed in back of your cabin. Danny said she often stayed there when you were visiting with your fiancée.'

'Yeah,' Terry said.

'The police - they're a bunch of fools - think it was deliberate. They say she started the fire on purpose and killed herself.'

T see.' She had told him she was finished with her story. Goodbye, Terry. I will remember you. He wished he had known what she had been talking about. But at least he knew now.

Stephen Floyd's voice was full of pain. 'Danny kind of agrees with them. He says Jenny's been blaming herself for what's been happening to her sister. You know, the trouble Dr Wagner's been having on Mars, the lost contact and all that. Are you still there, Terry?'

'Yes. I'm here.'

'That's just what Danny says. What does he know, huh? This must come as a terrible shock to you.'

'No. Wait. Yes, it is. Is Danny there? I'd like to talk to him.'

'He's at the morgue.'

'The morgue? Oh, yeah.'

Stephen Floyd spoke reluctantly. 'There isn't much left, but the police require a positive identification. I understand she has no family other than Dr Wagner?'

'That's true.' Terry swallowed and tasted his tongue as if it were something foul in his mouth. It was slipping down the back of his throat, but that was OK. Maybe it would kill him. 'I understand. I'll come. There's a six o'clock flight we used to catch. I'll come then, on that one.' .

'I can meet you at the airport. I'd like to help in any way I can. I'd never known a child like Jennifer before.'

'Thank you, Stephen. You're very kind. I'm sorry, I can't remember when the plane gets in. It seems to have slipped my mind.'

'Just get on the plane. I'll be there when you arrive.'

'Thanks. I'd better go. I'd better pack. I have things to do.'

'Take care of yourself,' Stephen said.

'Yeah.' Terry hung up the phone and sat in the dark. He thought of calling Dr Palmer and telling him that the crisis hadn't passed, after all. Instead he dialed Mission Control and asked them to page Tom Brenner. A minute later his partner came on the phone.

'This is Tom Brenner?'

'Tom. This is Terry. Any word from the Hawk?'

'Sorry, buddy. But they're all working on it here, as I'm

sure they're working on it on Mars. Are you having trouble sleeping?'

'Yeah,' Terry whispered.

'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine. I'm always fine. Let me know if you hear anything.'

'You'll be the first to hear. Catch you later.'

Terry put the phone down. There was no reason to cry, he told himself. He had been one of the lucky few who had known her. He was a lucky guy. He just needed to remember

that, and he wouldn't cry when they took him to the room to identify her remains. He would keep a straight face, because he knew if he broke just a tiny bit, he would break all the way, in half.

Under the harsh white light of her examination lamp, Dr Lauren Wagner poised a scalpel above the naked body that had once belonged to Professor James Ranoth, world-famous geologist and archaeologist, Nobel Prize winner, the greatest man who had ever lived, and friend. His body rested on a slightly inclined table. A hastily constructed drainage table waited for his blood at the end of the table. She told herself the autopsy was vital. She had to know how he had died, whether from dehydration, infection, violence, or something else.

She gripped the scalpel tightly and remembered her first semester in medical school - gross anatomy. It was odd how the memory pushed itself in now, after all these years. She had opened how many bodies since then? Five hundred? Maybe more? She was an experienced surgeon. The insides of both the living and the dead held no mystery to her. Yet how many of those hundreds had been friends? Not a one. The memory was not really odd, after all. It was just horrible, as horrible as this fucking planet.

Gross anatomy was the class all medical students dreaded. The second-year students had given them advice on cadaver selection. Try to get a man, not a woman. Try to get someone thin. Most important, you don't want someone who's been dead too long. They're hard to work with, those people.

The advice was a waste of time. None of her classmates got to choose. They were split into groups of four, and each group was assigned a table that held a covered body. The teacher told them to begin, but none of them wanted to peel away the mummy-like bandages that wrapped their cadavers. The amphitheater was warm; the cadavers smelled. The teacher told them they were smelling phenol, the preservative used to keep the cadaver from rotting. He didn't tell them, however, that phenol was also an anesthetic. Later, when they were days into the dissection, when their fingers began to tingle and go numb, they all thought they'd caught a dread disease from the corpse. The teacher thought it was funny. He had a unique sense of humor.

Lauren's group got an old man who looked as if he had been in a bad car accident back when Nixon was president. Lauren's partners made her cut first. They were all men, and

often made fun of her because she said she wanted to be an astronaut some day. They kidded her about how she would feel when it came time to dissect the man's penis.

The teacher had told them to start on the legs, and she took the scalpel and cut from where the thigh met the body, all the way down to the knee. But she was too timid. She only scratched the old man. Her teacher came by and snapped the word cut in her ear, making her jump. Later they were to learn it was his favorite word. Cut, Dr Wagner. Don't worry, he doesn't feel a thing. They never do.

Is that true, Jim? I don't want to hurt you.

Lauren was conducting the autopsy in the basement. She was alone. To the best of her knowledge, Bill was in the control room talking to Friend, Gary was in his bedroom plotting revenge, and Jessica was asleep on the couch in the living area, snoring. Jessica had not taken Jim's death well. She had gotten hysterical. Lauren had given her a shot.

Bill was probably still the monster Jim had spoken of. Lauren couldn't look at his face without wanting to turn away in revulsion. It was as if invisible maggots crawled over his skin. Yet he was a puzzling monster. He appeared genuinely upset over what had happened. He said that Jim had died in his arms, and that his death was so senseless, so unnecessary. He seemed to know a thing or two more than he was letting on, but when they asked him exactly how Jim died, he just shook his head and climbed up to the control room and shut the door.

Lauren had to find her own answers.

She began to cut with the knife.

A cold grave. A hole through snow and ice. A gray sky hanging over a black and white world. The scene seemed appropriate to Terry. It was the vivid roses he held that were out of place. There were red ones and yellow ones and white ones - they were all too

bright. He had never liked flowers, anyway. You bought them and you gave them to people and they just died. They were a waste of time, in his opinion.

It was sad how few had come to Jennifer's funeral, Terry thought. There was Stephen Floyd and his wife, Jean. She was crying, clutching a bride's missal in her gloved hands. Her husband was a good man. Stephen had taken him straight from the airport to the morgue, which was what Terry had wanted. Best to get it over with, he thought. The positive identification had been dealt with swiftly. Although she lay mostly in ashes, there was no doubt it was Jennifer. Remarkably, a handful of her long blond hair had survived the flames, along with her right arm, and her right hand. He noticed she was still wearing her magic ring.

'I'll wear it always, Jim.'

Her face had been obliterated.

After the police had left the morgue, Stephen suggested that he make the arrangements for the burial. He asked when would be a good time. Today, Terry said. Soon. Why wait?

Two other people were also present, Mr Russo, the Italian restaurant owner who had fed Lauren and himself on their last date together, and his son, Michael. The boy huddled in the cold beside his father, wearing the face of someone who would rather be watching football.

There was no priest or minister. Terry knew nothing about the local religious community, but he had inquired at a nearby Catholic church. They treated him beautifully. Was she baptized, Mr Hayes? You don't think so? We've heard it was a suicide, Mr Hayes. That's bad. But she was only a child, Father. Can't you come? Well, it's snowing and the Steelers are playing the Forty-Niners. We can pray for her soul if you'd like.

The priest hadn't said exactly those things, of course, but he had come close enough to make Terry vow to burn down the priest's church before he returned to Houston.



Terry looked up from his handful of bright flowers. Daniel was approaching from the direction of the trees, plodding through the virgin snow of the cemetery. He wore the scarf Jennifer had knitted him for Christmas. His eyes were red but his face was composed. They hugged beside the black casket.

'Are you all right?' Terry asked. It was a stupid question.

'No,' Daniel said.

'Do you know why she did it?' Terry asked.

Daniel turned and faced in the direction of the frozen lake, which was barely visible between the intervening trees. 'Because of Lauren,' he said.

'What about Lauren?' Terry asked.

Daniel shook his head. 'Jenny kept saying that something bad was going to happen to her sister, and that it was her fault. She said she was the only one who could stop it.'

'By killing herself?'

Daniel looked down at the coffin and trembled. 'She never said she was going to kill herself. But she knew something. Lauren is having problems. Jenny knew they were coming. She got strange. She used to frighten me. She used to talk about fire all the time, how important it was. You saw, Terry, how she could wave her hand through the flames and they wouldn't bother her. Maybe she thought this fire wouldn't burn her. Even when she poured gasoline over her head and...'

Daniel's voice cracked and he began to sob. Terry hugged him again. 'It wasn't your fault,' Terry said.

'I shouldn't have let her be by herself at the cabin so much,' Daniel wept.

'She liked to be alone. You couldn't have stopped her.'

'I'm going to miss her. I don't want to put her in this hole beside all these dead people.'

'It doesn't seem right,' Terry agreed.

'We should begin,' Stephen Floyd broke in gently.

Terry let go of Daniel and nodded. 'Fine. What do we do? I've never buried anyone before. The priest said he couldn't come.'

'We don't need a priest,' Stephen said firmly. He took the prayer book from his wife. 'We got married in a Catholic Church. We couldn't find a Bible around our

house, but Jean has her bride's missal. In it are prayers you can read at a funeral.'

'She was the sweetest girl,' Jean said nervously.

'People often do this,' Stephen continued. 'They read prayers and talk about the one who's died. It's fitting and dignified. We don't need strangers here. We're the ones who loved her.'

Deliver Jennifer, O Lord, from eternal death in that awful day. When the heavens and the Earth shall be shaken. When Thou shalt come to judge the world by fire. Amen.

The little book went around the small circle. Michael Russo was the only one who chose not to read a prayer, but his father recited from the missal and then added a personal prayer of his own for Lauren's safe return. The ceremony lasted a grand total of twenty minutes. It was long enough for Terry's tastes. He asked Stephen if he could remove the ring from Jennifer's finger. He wanted to save it for Lauren. Stephen had to open the coffin, but he got it quickly. That done, Terry knelt and kissed the coffin and left his roses on top.

Goodbye. I will remember you.

Stephen offered to stay and take care of the details. The rest of the group accompanied Terry down the snow-clogged path that led out of the cemetery. They had reached the cars when Mr Russo said to his son, as if by way of apology to the rest of them, 'You didn't know her, Mike. Is that why you didn't say a prayer?'

The boy was disinterested. 'I don't know. I didn't want to say one 'cause she didn't die naturally. 'Cause she killed herself. That's a stupid thing to do, I know.'

In a blinding movement Daniel grabbed Michael by the collar and hoisted the plump boy six inches off the ground. 'Don't you ever say anything bad about her,' he hissed. 'Not if you want to live.'

'Danny!' Terry cried. 'Let him go.' Mr Russo, however, made no move to protect his son.

'That was a heartless thing to say, Mike,' Mr Russo snapped.

Michael looked appropriately chastised, and afraid. Daniel still had a good grip on him. All of a sudden, though, he loosened his hold and shook his head.

'I'm sorry,' Danny said. 'I shouldn't have done that. You didn't know her, but she couldn't bear people hurting each other. It's what made her so great.'

The incident passed. Minutes later Terry bid the group farewell. He declined Jean's and Mr Russo's offers of a ride to his cabin. He was lost, but he felt that a long walk in the snow might take him somewhere. He couldn't go to the cabin right away. The thought of going home without either of them was unbearable.

'What are we supposed to do?' Lauren asked. 'I've never buried anyone before.'

'We can read parts from the Bible,' Jessica said, her voice as smooth as the ten cc's of Valium in her, bloodstream. 'I've got my Mom's Bible. She used to read it at lots of funerals. We'll pray together. The Lord will hear us.'

'I hope he does,' Lauren muttered.

Another beautiful bloody sunset spread around them. Only a day ago, as Mars counted time, they had sat and chatted with Jim. Good conversation on Thursday, dissection on Friday. The autopsy said that he had died of a heart attack. A fine doctor she had turned out to be. But what exactly had brought on the attack? Mitral valve prolapse never led to cardiac arrest, not that she knew of. She was at a complete loss, and Gary and Bill were both asking her for her professional opinion.

Gary climbed out of the grave he had just finished digging and stood next to the dark green plastic bag that held Jim's body. Gary glanced at Bill, who waited inside his suit, stonefaced, at the top of the hole, his back to the setting sun.

'Why don't you begin, Jessie,' Bill said.

His wife opened the book and - her gloved hands turning the pages with great difficulty - settled on a selection. 'This is one of the Psalms,' she said. 'I think Jim would like it.' She cleared her throat. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...

"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil..."

She finished the Psalm, and added, 'We'll miss you, Jim.'

Jessica handed the open book to Lauren. The pages were yellowed with years. It was ironic, Lauren thought. Gary was trying to convince her there was a devil loose on the planet, and maybe he was right. But she didn't believe there was a God here. If he did exist, he couldn't have anything to do with Mars. She knew there was no one to hear their prayers. Shaking her head silently, Lauren gave the book to Gary.

But I did love you, Jim. I always will.

Gary thumbed through the pages angrily, but couldn't find what he was looking for. He slammed the Bible shut. 'I'll say my own prayer.' He addressed the red heavens. 'If you're there, God, and you do care about us, please watch over Jim's soul. I believed in him. I think he helped me believe in you. He was the best of us all.' Gary spoke quietly to the plastic bag at his feet. 'He was my best friend.'

There followed an empty silence. It was always a one sided conversation when you talked to God. Gary thrust out the Bible to Bill. 'Here,' he said bitterly. 'You're our commander. You're the one who should be saying these things.'

Bill took the book without any sign of emotion. He spoke to the rectangular hole in the ground. 'Our loss is great. Jim was rare among men. All his life he accomplished what he set out to do. He let nothing stand in his way. He was brilliant, he was kind, but above all else, he was courageous. We can take a lesson from the example he set, to perform our duty without hesitation, and let nothing stop us. Our thirst is great but soon it will pass. We will complete our explorations and leave this world. Tomorrow Jessie will accompany me under the ground.'

Jessie.

The last rays of the sun licked their commander's back. A gust of wind came up and sprayed snow in the air; it settled on their faceplates like dirt thrown in their faces. Bill searched the Bible. 'But for now we must say goodbye to our friend,' he said. 'I would like to say the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth, as it is in heaven..."'

I will show thee the condemnation of the great harlot, Lori, who sits upon many waters. With whom the Kings of Earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the Earth were made drunk with the wine of her immortality.

Lauren did not recognize the voice in her head. It was not the voice of her own thoughts, nor was it Bill's voice. Yet it flowed in rhythm with Bill's words and it seemed to express a part of him that was still hidden, but a part which was becoming clearer with each passing second, as the light steadily faded.

"'Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and..."

And I saw Lori drunk with the blood of saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus...

' "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," Bill said. "'Amen.'"

Amen. And fuck you, sweet Lori.

Lauren was having difficulty breathing. Her lungs felt as if they were filled with burning ash. Yet there was a cold spreading inside her, too, like frost growing on a cracked window in an empty house. The sun had set. Bill closed the Bible and stared at her. The ceremony was over. She was glad it was over.

'That was very nice,' Gary said sarcastically.

'Yeah,' Jessica agreed blankly.

Bill nodded, still watching Lauren. Finally he spoke, 'It's late. We have shown our respects. You will bury the body, Gary. The rest of us will return to the ship.'

'Td like to stay,' Lauren said.

'Fine,' Bill said, 'Let's go, Jessie. We have much to accomplish tomorrow.'

As they turned and walked toward the Hawk, Gary reached for the laser he had earlier lain beneath Jim's body. In seconds he had released the safety and leveled the rifle at Bill's back. Lauren closed her eyes, and heard Gary pull the trigger.

But no devastating beam of energy spurted forth. Lauren opened her eyes and found a shocked Gary examining the laser. Bill had turned and watched him patiently. Jessica stood to Bill's left, to the left of the ozone, not understanding that anything unusual had just happened.

'Is something the matter, Gary?' Bill asked.

'No.'

'Something I can help you with?'

'No,' Gary said.

'Good,' Bill said, taking his wife's hand and turning away again. 'You need not bury him deep.'

Jessica and Bill disappeared inside the Hawk. Lauren stepped to Gary's side. He had thrown the laser to the ground.

'You missed,' she said.

'The laser's broken.'

'Obviously.'



Gary knelt and took hold of Jim's legs. 'I didn't particularly like Bill's last remark,' he said. 'Give me a hand, Lori.'

'OK.'

'We have a deep hole here,' Gary said. 'He'll rest peacefully. Nothing will disturb him.'

Lauren nodded, and took hold of the shoulders.

'We don't have to worry about Jim,' Gary said. 'I know we don't have to worry about him.'

'Yeah,' Lauren said. Still holding his legs, Gary jumped into the grave.

'The bastard overloaded the laser,' he said. 'He's the one we have to worry about.' Gary quickly slipped Jim's body into the ice-rimmed hole, setting it down gently, and then climbed out. He began to scan the area.

'What are you looking for?' she asked.

'Jim won't hurt us,' he said for what seemed the tenth time. 'But I think we should get a big rock.'

'What for?' Lauren asked.

'It's good to be careful. I'm looking for a boulder that we can roll over the grave.' He got angry when she shook her head as if he was crazy. 'Just help me, goddamnit! We don't know what's going on here.' He turned away. 'We don't know nothing.'

The steps echoed from the control room to the bedroom where Lauren lay staring at the ceiling. According to the engineers who had built the Hawk, it was impossible to hear footsteps from one deck to the next. Lauren figured Bill must have gained two thousand pounds.

Jessica was asleep on the other bed, her system fortified for a long excursion in dreamland with two grams of phenobarbital. Lauren had contemplated taking a pill herself, but only for a tenth of a second. In her right hand, under the covers, she held the razor-sharp scalpel she had used during the autopsy on Jim.

The door opened. Lauren jumped, but it was only Gary. He sat at her feet, and the bedroom door shut automatically behind him. He wore a pair of red shorts and nothing else. His muscles looked remarkably tan and supple considering that he hadn't exercised in the sun in months.

'Can't sleep?' he asked.

'That's a stupid question.' She sat up against the wall and tucked her bent knees under her T-shirt. Her bare breasts touched her thighs.

'Will I wake Jessie talking?' Gary asked.

'She'll stay asleep,' Lauren said sarcastically.

'She suspects nothing?'

'Not even that you tried to shoot her husband in the back a couple of hours ago.'

Gary tightened his fists. 'Are you glad I failed?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, listen to this. The other lasers are overloaded, too. Coincidence? Thank God we still have the one at the Karamazov.'

Lauren coughed with a dry throat. She was beginning to believe she would give her life for a glass of water. 'I was just thinking of Jim,' she said. 'How wise he was. How much he saw that none of us could see. He never tried to do what you did today.'

Gary was hurt. 'I know I'm not Jim. But the situation was different yesterday. He had a theory. He was trying to gather information. He didn't have the proof we have. No one was dead then.'

"The autopsy showed it was his heart,' Lauren said.

'You believe that?'

Lauren sniffed. 'I don't know.'

'I remember once when Jim and I were sitting alone together in his room in the isolation complex,' Gary said. 'A moth began to buzz around his lamp, and I started to swat it, but he stopped me. He said to open the window and let it out. Sure, I thought. We were in

quarantine. Those windows couldn't be opened without taking out a half dozen screws. But you know what he did when I told him that? He went to the kitchen and got a knife and undid the entire window. Just to save a moth's life.' Gary shook his head. 'I don't think Jim could have shot a rattlesnake if it was ready to bite him.'

'He was very brave,' Lauren said, thinking that Bill had said the same thing. She noticed that Gary had a new book with him. It made her mad. 'Oh, and I see you've got fresh reading material. I don't know where you find the time, what with all the funerals we've been having lately. What is it this time? The Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Gary held up the book. Dracula.

'What are you reading, Jenny?'

'Nothing. Just something I found at the library.'

'And it's a secret?'

'It's a love story.'

Lauren felt miserably depressed. Nothing was sacred anymore. Not even young girls with golden hair and blue

eyes. 'I didn't know you had a copy, too,' she said.

That startled Gary. 'Too? does Bill have this book?'

'No. Jenny was reading Dracula before I left. She was really into it, but I burned it before she could finish it.' Anger rose inside Lauren. 'I burned it because it's garbage. How can a story help us now? You and your Martian Chronicles and your lost expeditions. You hear those footsteps? He's right above us!'

I said it. I confessed my faith. Am I a believer now?

Gary nodded gravely. 'You're right, I know these stories are bullshit. But what about the stuff that inspired the authors to write the stories? Some of that stuff could be true.'

'What stuff?'

'Jim mentioned ghost stories. I've read some fairly reliable cases about people who've drunk blood and had supernormal strength.'

'In the Enquirer?' Lauren asked dryly.

'No. In sensible books written by sensible people. Get off your high horse and open your mind. Weird stuff is going on around us left and right. We can't just close our eyes and say we're astronauts and NASA will take care of everything.'

'You can't possibly be talking about vampires?'

Gary paused. He blinked. 'I think I am.'

Lauren chuckled. 'Bill can stand the sun.'

Gary leaned forward, intense. 'I don't think he likes it. At the funeral, he kept his back to it. Plus we're on Mars. The sun's a lot brighter on Earth.'

'There are no vampires on Earth.'

'What about on Mars?'

She gestured to his book. 'That story was written on Earth. You've got a gap of millions of miles to account for before you start making sense. And you're not going to

make sense as long as you keep talking about vampires.'

'Call them what you want,' Gary snapped. 'AH right, they're not vampires, but they're like vampires. Let's call them Martians. How do we kill these Martians? That's all I care about.'

'I don't think that book's going to give you any ideas.' 'There's a pattern here. How can you deny it?' 'What pattern? Dracula was a count who lived in Transylvania. Bram Stoker was a writer who lived in Ireland. We're on Mars, Gary!'

'You said that already. What about the blood beside Ivan's bed? What about his abnormal strength?' 'I never actually saw Ivan drinking the blood.' 'He would have chewed on your neck had you given him half a chance,' Gary said. He sat for a moment. 'Perhaps something in the distant past inspired these legends. I'm reminded of Jim's cavern under the Himalayas. We may not be the first civilization on our world capable of space flight. There could have been a people here, too. There could have been an interaction between us and them, and they could have been real nasty bloodsuckers. The stories we're talking about could have arisen from then. Quit laughing! Lots of myths have been found to be based on historical fact.'

'You have been reading the Enquirer.' She waved him away with her hand, tasting the salt that crusted her lips. 'I'm tired of arguing about this. If you've got garlic, I'll be glad to keep it by my bed.' 'I don't have any,' Gary said seriously. She spoke wearily. 'What else does your monster bible suggest?'

Gary studied the novel. 'Most of this you'll know from TV. First Dr Van Helsing prescribes driving a stake through the heart of the vampire.'

'Bill won't go for that.'

'Or driving the vampire off with a communion wafer or holy water.'

'We should have brought a priest with us.'

'Or using a cross. Jesus, Lori, we can make a cross. Listen to me! Our souls are in danger.'

'A cross is just a symbol. Doesn't Van Helsing say that as well? If I remember correctly, he was big on faith. A cross won't work for us. Neither of us is a Christian.'

Gary protested, 'I was baptized.'

'So was I. Who gives a fuck? I'm sure Martian Bill doesn't.'

'I believe in God,' Gary said. 'How else can you explain people like Jim? He went down there, knowing the danger. He died trying to save us.' Gary paused, and asked in a worried voice, 'You don't think he's going to rise, do you?'

She smiled painfully. 'No, I cut out his heart in the autopsy. It's in a bottle in the basement. Even a vampire needs his heart.'

Gary considered. 'You may have a point about traditional symbols failing us. There was a cross on the cover of Jessie's Bible and Bill didn't bat an eye.'

'Oh, that was a great pun. Thank you. Thank you very much. That's just what I needed.'

'Shut up,' Gary said. 'There may be a weapon vampires and Martians can't withstand. One that doesn't have anything to do with belief or disbelief.'

'What?' Lauren asked.

'Fire.'

I see you brought the fire.

There was a ring of truth to what Gary was saying. In fact it rang perfectly well with the voices in her head. She didn't know whether that was good or bad, yet his remark made her heart race.

'I'm all in favor of getting the other laser,' she said. 'If we get the chance. But you know we can't use it against Bill inside the ship.'

Gary nodded. 'That's two problems right there. But I have a plan. Bill said he wanted to take Jessie with him tomorrow.'



'He might take us all,' Lauren interrupted.

'I think he can only handle one at a time. Don't ask me why. He seems to have lost his inhibitions about his wife.'

'With his super strength, he could kill us all.'

'So you do believe he's strong?'

'I just don't want to get in a fight with him.'

'He doesn't want to kill us,' Gary said.

'Oh, yeah? He needs to fill out his vampire family. Why doesn't he destroy the other laser? Surely he suspects we didn't lose it.'

'He knows if he leaves the ship, I'll take off. He's clever. He doesn't go outside without taking insurance with him. But this time he's not going to cash in.'

'What are you going to do?' Lauren asked.

'This planet murdered my best friend. It's going to pay. It's going to burn. Fire's got to kill these bastards, and their heart has to be down in that pit where Bill wants everyone to go. We have a nuclear bomb in the basement. I'm going to drag it down there and set it off and flush the devils out.'

'You'd be killed.'

'No. When Jim gave us the code, he said the warhead could be triggered manually, and that it had a timer in it.'

'Bill will stop you,' Lauren said.

'He isn't going to be here.'

'You can't set it while he's gone with Jessie.'

'I don't intend to. I'm going to take the bomb down there after he returns with Jessie. We'll retrieve the laser from the

Karamazov, and then I'll wait outside the Hawk and greet both of them with the hole in the chest.'

'You'd kill her?' Lauren gasped.

'She'll already be dead.'

'I won't let you do that.'

'Then he'll take us one by one! Don't you see, he hits us where we're weakest. Jim knew the danger, but he hesitated because he couldn't conceive of killing a friend. But if we don't kill them then one of us will be taken down there, and then the other. We'll both be turned into Ivan clones. We'll return home and look just fine to everybody else. Except at night we'll go out and suck on people's throats until the whole goddamn world is one walking corpse.'

'Stop it!' Lauren cried

'No! Think of the consequences. You don't need to kill them. I'll do it.'

Lauren looked away. "There must be another way.'

'There isn't.'

'We should get Jessie off drugs, tell her what's going on.'

Gary snickered. 'Right. We'll tell her we have to blow away her husband. Maybe we can get her to hold him still for the shot. Give me a break.'

Lauren had an idea. 'The boat.'

'Huh?'

'The boat we made out of the jeep. Hummingbird isn't the only way to the island. You remember? Jim insisted we tow it back and anchor it on the canal beneath the end of the cave. There's another way, Gary. We'll let them go tomorrow, and then we'll retrieve the laser and follow them.'

'We'd be hours behind,' Gary said. 'We'd be too late. Jessie won't be able to hold out.'

'Jim did.'

'Jim's dead.'

'We have to try,' Lauren said. 'We have to give her that chance.'

'No. By the time we reached the island, there'd be two monsters. They'd creep up on us in the dark. We wouldn't come back human.'

Lauren got up and stepped to Jessica's bed. She fixed the blankets about Jessica's shoulders. Jessica slept on.

'Is her one life less precious than ten lives?' Lauren asked, looking down at her friend's face. 'Than a hundred? What would Jim have said?' Lauren stroked Jessica's hand. 'We've lost Jim, we've lost Bill. And now we're sending her down there ignorant. We've got to give her a chance.'

'I don't like it.'

Lauren came back and sat on the bed beside him. She spoke firmly. 'We'll take the boat. We'll do the best we can. At least we will have tried.'

Gary sighed. 'OK, Doc. But I'm going alone. I have enough on my conscience already, the way I let Jim die.'

'We're going together.'

'No way. It's me alone. That's an order.'

'I don't give a shit about your orders. I have to go.' She glanced at the ceiling, in the direction of the heavy footsteps. 'If you come back like him, I'd just as soon die. Besides, it will take two to paddle the boat.'

Gary put a strong arm around her. 'I can never win an argument with you.' He added, 'I hope the warhead doesn't sink the boat.'

'Don't take it. It will just slow us down. The next expedition can incinerate the place.'

'If I have my way, there won't be a next expedition. This planet's going to pay now. It's going to burn.'

Lauren felt tears in her eyes. 'God,' she whispered.

'Lori?'

'I was just thinking how we'll be leaving Jim here.' The grief broke inside her at last and she began to sob against his chest. 'Remember the time I discovered his cookies, Gary? I think he was eating them while we were fasting at the isolation complex. He liked sweets. He liked coffee, too, and I wouldn't even make it for him.'

Gary spoke softly. 'But you did make it for him. It was wonderful coffee. He loved it. He loved you.'

She wiped at her face. 'I'm going to miss him so much.' She put her arms around him. 'Hold me, Gary. Please hold me.'

They stayed in each other's arms as the night slowly passed. But Lauren didn't sleep. She didn't have to. Her nightmare was finally awake. She lay beside Gary with her scalpel in her hand until the sun came up, listening to the footsteps overhead.

At the charred remains of Jennifer's private cabin, Terry Hayes knelt and collected wood for his fireplace. It was dark and snowing, and he was cold. He thought it would not be long before the snow covered the ashes left over from the fire, as it had probably already covered Jennifer's freshly dug grave. From identifying her remains, he knew ashes of her body must lie scattered in the wood ashes all around him. He had changed his mind about flowers. He decided that later he would bring some here and plant them. In another season, when it was warm, he thought they might bloom.

Terry bundled his wood together and walked to his cabin. It was pitch black inside but he made no effort to find the light switch. He went immediately to the fireplace and arranged the singed scraps he had gathered. There was a lighter on top of the bricks, and soon the chill was melting from his limbs before a cracking fire. It was then he saw

Jennifer's new typewriter on the floor, and the stack of papers beside it.

Her story.

The pages were divided into two sections. The first sheets were in a graceful flowing penmanship. Not a word was crossed out or a letter smudged. The second section was neatly typed. She must have finished it sitting where he was now, he thought, working late at night and using the flames for light. It would have been her way.

Terry took the silver ring from his pocket and set it on the bricks next to the fire. He began to read.

In the Garden, on the edge of the vast ocean, and the borders of the tall mountains, lived the people of the Sastra, the first and greatest of human beings. Because they were from the beginning, they were untarnished, beautiful and wise, of fair form and kind desire. Their King was Rankar, mightiest of the Sastra, and their Queen, Chaneen, loveliest of the offspring of the gods..."

## BOOKFOUR

### The Curse

## TWENTY-FIVE

### Excerpts from Jennifer Wagner's Story

Janier awoke from a dark dream to find herself being carried under the surface of Asure. Her hands were bound at her back with metal cords. Hellish faces grinned at her from the shadows. In her first few moments of consciousness, she struggled violently. But they laughed at her and tightened their claws into her skin and she began to bleed. Thinking to conserve her strength, she decided to remain still. She could feel her sword banging against her leg. She did not understand why they let her keep it, unless it was because they feared her so little.

Janier remembered with guilt her crossing into Asure. With her warriors by her side, she had emerged upon an icy black plain. There she 'd immediately had a change of heart. The enemy was much stronger when it was dark, and seeing the conditions, she attempted to retreat to the desert. Unfortunately, the bridge was gone, and it was then she knew she had been tricked. From seemingly nowhere a rain of poisonous darts fell upon her

warriors. She tried invoking the fire, but the Messenger had left her arm, and nothing happened. Her entire company of warriors perished in agony. She was the only one the enemy spared. She did not know why. They had bound her limbs and choked the air from her lungs until she fainted.

If only she had listened to Chaneen.

Thinking of her sister, under the dripping teeth and suffocating

breath of her assailants, Janier lost consciousness again.

She awoke with a slap in the face. Dizzy and bloody, she rolled on her side and opened her eyes. She was in a vast underground chamber. Pools of lava boiled on her left. They filled the air with a depressing red glow and a foul stench. She tried to stand, but her hands and feet were still bound. She fell forward on hard black stone and banged her head. A throng of watching female Asurians jeered. They sat on rows upon rows of bleachers, that curved upwards and were lost in the dark. They were hideous, with wide snouts, large teeth, scaly hides, and red eyes that shone with excitement.

Amidst the shouts, Janier heard a deep chuckle. It was the Asurian King, Kratine. He sat on a black throne, wearing a gold corset about his midsection and a purple cloak over his shoulders. A heavy crown laden with jewels topped his big head. He clung to his illusion of human form, a fair handsomeness that reminded her of Rankar. Yet his eyes were unmasked, and that made Janier tremble to look upon them. They were empty black holes that led into nothingness. As she struggled to her feet, he stood from his throne and slowly approached her. He continued to chuckle as he reached into her belt and withdrew her bloodstained sword.

He smiled. I see you brought the fire.'



For a moment he held the blade at her throat. Then he broke the sword over his knee and tossed the pieces into the nearby volcanic pit. The lava flared briefly with yellow flame, and then settled back into its sober red glow.

'So we meet again, Janier,' Kratine said. 'You come to my land, after all.' He bowed. I am honored.'

Janier tested her cords. They were strong, tightly fastened. She was not going to break free. She was surprised to feel Chaneen 's ring still on her finger.

'You will get nothing from me, Kratine,' she said. 'Best you kill me now and save your time.'

Kratine stepped back as if surprised. 'Kill you? I have no intention

of killing you. I intend for you to return home. Yes, that is what I intend.'

'You lie.'

'Lie, my Princess? Why would I lie to you? Surely you accuse me falsely.'

I will not be tricked,' she said defiantly.

'Are you so eager to die?' Kratine glanced at the boiling mud. I would regret destroying such a beautiful woman. Truly, I would.' He moved closer, and she could feel his breath in her face. 'But I'm sure I won't have to, for you are going to perform me a valuable service. Yes, you, Princess Janier. You are going to be my emissary, to your exalted Queen. I want to offer Chaneen a truce.'

'After you promised the same to Rankar?' Janier said bitterly. 'And then murdered so many of the Sastra? Chaneen will not believe you.'

'But you have to believe me, Janier. You have no choice but to be my emissary.' He paused. 'Come. We are reasonable beings. I have few warriors left. Your own army is gone. The killing has helped neither of us.'

Janier glanced at the watching throng. 'You appear to have sufficient force left to overrun the Garden.'

'That is where you are wrong. You did not wield the fire. Only your sister's invocation could have brought the Messenger. I know Chaneen still waits in your Garden. I have no desire to face her.'

'Where is Rankar? Where is Tier?'

'Your King is dead.'

'That was your purpose from the beginning. To lure him here.'

'Need I refresh your memory? Rankar volunteered to come here. I originally had no intention of bringing him to my land. He surprised me with his request.'

'Why did you kill him?'

Kratine chuckled. 'A silly question.'

'What did you want the couple for?'

'For reasons that will become clear to you soon.'

'Where is Tier? Did you kill him, too?'

Kratine stepped behind her back. She could feel his eyes on her body. 'You are my captive. Is it fair that I have to answer all your questions? Don't you want to hear the conditions of the truce I am proposing?'

Janier stood straight. 'I am listening.'

Kratine touched her hair. His fingers felt like claws, as indeed they actually were. 'You are like your sister, Janier, very beautiful.'

'List your conditions.'

Kratine took a step away from her back. 'Of course. First, Chaneen must swear an oath never to invade my land.'

'You know she would never do that,' Janier said.

'Then it is a simple request.'

'You try to deceive me. You said your people could not survive in Asure. Now you say you are content with what you have?'

'You twist my words. I did not say I am content.' Kratine walked back to his throne. On the right side of the black seat were three huge brown oval eggs. He selected one and returned to her side. 'Do you know what this is?' he asked.

'Yes. The chamber in which your unborn grow.'

'Very good, Janier. I hold an Asurian child on the verge of birth. Unfortunately, this infant can't survive in this land, as you have pointed out. Indeed, this child is about to die.' Kratine cracked the top off the egg, and a horrible stench assailed Janier's nose. The Asurian King dug inside the shell and removed a squirming miniature of the monsters that watched from the stands. Careful not to spill the fluid inside the shell, Kratine set down the egg and carried the struggling infant to the edge of the lava pool.

'What are you doing?' she cried.

'I'm making a small sacrifice to emphasize my point.' He lowered the kicking infant slowly into the mud. There came a shrill scream as the creature's feet were seared off. Kratine, however, was patient. He took his time killing the creature. Finally he returned to her side. 'You see now how willing I am to sacrifice my own in order to reach a truce?' he said.

Janier saw nothing of the kind from his act, only that she didn't want

to be lowered into the boiling mud. For the first time in her life, fear dominated her thoughts. She decided to feign cooperation in the hope of escape.

I will carry your message to my sister,' she said. 'What are your other conditions?'

Kratine nodded. 'Ah, a change of heart. That is good. But what I have to say next is difficult. I admire you, Janier. You have spirit. You are a great warrior. None could doubt your abilities. But you have brought great misery to my people. Even Rankar did not inflict the fire so often and so mercilessly. You had my warriors on the run. They were clearly defeated. Only a small number escaped across my bridge. You knew there were too few of my warriors left to harm your people. Yet you pushed forward and crossed my bridge with the intention of killing the last of the Asurians. That was not necessary. That was evil.' Janier held her wrath in check. 'You attacked us first.'

'We attacked out of need, so we could live. We have little water here, and what little we do have, we are forced to hoard underground. Naturally we tried to invade your Garden. But you came here to kill for the sake of killing. Again, I say to you, that was evil.'

Anger overshadowed Janier's caution. 'I have seen the way your people fight. They torture their captives. They drink their blood.'

'They drink because they are thirsty from lack of water.'

'In our mountains, there was muck water,' Janier said.

Kratine ran a sharp finger over the top of her breasts. 'Does it make us evil, to enjoy our duty?' Janier could think of nothing to say. Kratine continued. 'Did Chaneen tell you to cross over into my land?'

'You were telling me of your conditions.'

'She told you not to go,' Kratine said. 'Is that not so? Speak! Admit that you were wrong. Admit that you violated your own Queen's orders.'

'Of what use is such an admission to you?'

Kratines voice softened. 'I merely wish for you to be able to return to your sister with a clear conscience.'

'What are the conditions of your truce?' she repeated.

'Just the one I mentioned. Chaneen must promise not to invade my lands. She has a good heart. I will believe her if she promises. I respect sincerity, Janier. That is the only other condition that I have. You must return to your home and sincerely express my views. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Very good. I am pleased that you do. If you didn't, I would send another emissary, and then I would have no reason to keep you alive. Still, I do have plenty of reason to put you to death, don't I? Answer me truthfully.'

Janier was becoming confused. He held out freedom one moment, and then took it away. He made her feel worse than him. He was evil, there was no question of that, but had she also been at fault? His blank eyes taunted her, the scream of the dying Asurian plagued her.

'You have another of my people?' she asked warily.

'But of course,' Kratine said. 'Should I send for him? He could go in your stead, and you could stay here with me. Do you think that would be best, Janier?'

'Who is this one?'

Kratine spoke with pride. 'A great warrior. The leader of your forces.'

'Tier?'

' 'Yes. That is his name. Oh, I had forgotten. He is your husband. I understand your excitement. That is good. Should I send for him? He could be my emissary, I'm sure. He is very devoted.'

'Devoted?' she began.

Kratine leaned close and smiled. 'You were about to say that your husband could not be devoted to me. Is that not so, Princess?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Well, you are wrong!' His wrath hit her like a physical blow and she cringed. 'You see, he is mine now. Mine!' Kratine grabbed her by the back of her neck and pulled her to the edge of the boiling mud. He held her face close to the lava and she had to close her eyes to keep from going blind. The heat was unbearable. 'I broke his will, Janier! I

tortured him. You humans can only take so much pain, and I gave him a great deal.'

'Stop it!'

'Stop? I'm just beginning. Would you like to see him?'

She nodded weakly. Kratine pulled back her head and spoke with sudden gentleness in her ear. 'Do you love him?' he asked.

'Yes.'

Kratine was sympathetic. 'He was your lover. A fortunate man. I will bring him to you. Oh, look, Janier, he is already here. He is descending from above.'

Suspended from two metal chains, Tier was being lowered toward the pool of lava. They brought him to a halt only a dozen feet from where she stood, and she could see how his battered head hung unmoving on his lacerated chest. Both his arms had been cruelly broken; his jagged bones sliced through the skin at the elbows. His entire body was caked with dried blood. Janier could see no sign of breathing, and she began to weep.

'He's dead,' she said.

Kratine sighed. 'It is sad. Yet such is the fate of many courageous warriors.'

Janier bowed her head. 'We did not want to hurt anyone. We only wanted to be left alone.' She glanced up again. Her husband's eyes were half open; the sockets had rolled back into his head. 'Oh, Tier!'

Kratine led her to where she had been standing before. 'It is a hard universe,' he said. 'Survival is earned at a price. We of Asure know this. We are much older than the Sastra, and have greater experience and wisdom in these matters. I sympathize with your sorrow. Why not return him to Chaneen and let her mend his injuries with the power of her touch? You could stay in his place, as payment for the sins committed against Asure.'



Janier shook her head, trying not to look at her husband. 'Chaneen can't bring back the dead.'

'A pity. But perhaps he could still go as my messenger. I could record the conditions of my truce on a scroll, and attach it to his body, and

return him to your Garden. At least then he would have a decent burial. Come, I have asked you before. Should I send you or him as my emissary?'

The thought of leaving Tier's body with Kratine was repulsive to Janier. Yet she knew she had to escape. She had to return to Chaneen and tell her of this atrocity. Perhaps then her sister would summon all her powers and lay waste to Asure.

I will present your wishes to my Queen,' she said.

'Excellent. You are a spirited young woman. You can present my position forcefully. You will do that, won't you? This is important to me, that you are sincere, that you have an open heart. You have opened your heart to me, haven't you?'

Janier nodded, giving any answer that would lead to freedom. I will explain everything to my sister that you have said.'

'You are a good child.' Kratine stepped behind her once more and

began to loosen the metal cords that bound her wrists. 'Now I will set

you free and you can be on your way. Yes, soon you will be home, and

walking in your fair Garden. Oh! What is this? A ring. Is this

Chaneen's ring?'

'Yes, 'Janier said.

'How is it that you are wearing your sister's ring?'

'She gave it to me before I went into battle.'

'Why?'

I don't know why.'

'How touching,' Kratine said, finishing with her cords. Blood flowed back into her hands and she was able to move her fingers. 'How beautiful. But you understand, of course, that you must remove it now. Now that you are mine.'

I don't understand,' she stuttered. Standing before her tormentor, the ring seemed the only link she had left to her sister. She desperately wanted to hold on to it. Kratine slid his big head around the side of her cheek.

'What did you say?' he asked quietly.

'I prefer to keep the ring.' She shrugged. 'It is only a small thing.'

'A small thing,' he repeated, with satisfaction in his voice. 'That is true. But you are my emissary now, and it is the small things that matter the most to me. You did agree to represent me, am I correct?'

'Yes.'

'Then remove the ring. Throw it in the mud. Be rid of this small thing.'

Janier shook her head faintly. Kratine moved his ear close to her mouth.

I didn't quite hear that,' he said. When she didn't respond, he took her chin and forced her to look in his eyes. They shone like flat black mirrors, and in them it seemed she saw her own soul; she saw it as empty as his eyes. 'Tell me again,' he said.

'Chaneen gave the ring to me,' she whispered.

'So?'

'She is my Queen, my sister.'

'Then you think to deceive me!' He shoved her to the floor where she struck her head for the second time. Once more the crowd jeered. Blood trickled from her head onto her gown. Kratine stepped forward and towered over her. He was furious. 'You try to trick me. You have not opened your heart.' Janier trembled. 'No.'

The crowd began to applaud. Kratine spoke harshly. 'Your lover was like you in the beginning. He thought he could take advantage of me. He had to be taught the error of his ways. In the end, after much torture, he learned. Do I need to repeat the lessons for you, Janier?'

She moaned. 'No.'

He knelt by her side and his cruel manner vanished as quickly as it had come. 'Are you afraid ? You can tell me if you are. I will understand.'

'Yes,' Janier said.

'You want to go home, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'As my emissary?'

'Yes.'

He stroked her hair and now his touch was gentle. 'I can be merciful. But surely you realize I have to choose an emissary I can trust?'

'Yes.'

'Can I trust you?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want me to send you instead of your husband?'

She coughed. It was hard to breath in Asure. I don't know what you mean.'

'Do you want me to send you?'

'Yes.'

Kratine helped her to her feet. 'At last I sense sincerity in your words,' he said. 'It is good. Now I know you don't mind abandoning your husband. Now there can be no doubt.' He smiled. 'Since the choice has been made, there's no need to keep him hanging around.' Kratine gestured with his hand to his aides. 'Lower our brave warrior into his bath. Excellent.'

Janier averted her eyes. Yet suddenly there was an agonizing scream, and her head snapped up. Tier was writhing on the sinking metal chains as his feet turned to black stumps on the surface of the boiling pool.

'Stop!' she screamed. She appealed to Kratine. 'Stop it! Please!'

He regarded her with puzzlement. 'What do you want?'

Tier's face twisted into a mask of agony. Blood dripped from his cindered feet into the lava. Faint red clouds of steam spurted over what was left of his calves. The audience cheered loudly as his cries rent the chamber.

'You can't do this!' Janier cried.

Kratine spoke calmly. 'But isn't this what you wanted? To go in his place as my emissary?'

'But you said he was dead!'

I don't recall making such a statement. He's a strong warrior. A little torture wasn't going to kill him. To be honest, Janier, you surprised me when you assumed he was dead. You are full of surprises. I have always found that an attractive quality in a female.'

'You misled me! Let him go!'

Kratine raised an eyebrow as he studied the situation. 'If I let him go, he'll fall rather quickly into his bath. That's what I think, at least. However, I am always ready to oblige a beautiful woman.'

'You're terrible!' Janier cried. 'You're evil!'

Suddenly her condemnations were choked off in her throat. Kratine had grabbed her neck, and he was strong, far stronger than she was. He pressed his face close to hers, and his breath was like the fumes that spouted from the lava, only it was cold.

'Once more you accuse me, Princess!' he said. 'It was your own cowardice that put your lover in the mud.'

I didn't know he was alive!

'You thought he might be dead, but you could not be certain. You thought only of yourself. You were willing to sacrifice him to save yourself. Isn't that so? Admit it. Admit your sin!'

She pleaded. 'I didn't know.'

He gestured to Tier, still screaming as more and more of his body was lowered into the hissing mud. 'You can be sure he is alive now. Look! He calls for you to save him. And I will release him, if you agree to take his place. Who is it to be, Janier? You or him?'

Janier hesitated. Tier was badly hurt. She doubted he could survive long enough to be brought before Chaneen. Kratine would release him, and he would only die later on. It would be a waste. Plus she couldn't be lowered into that boiling mud. She didn't want to go in there.

In the end Janier could not answer his question, and so revealed her decision. Kratine chuckled to himself as he spoke to his aides. 'Put the brave warrior in his grave, and be quick. He is to be admired.'

Tier shouted forth a final burst of torment, and then there was silence as he disappeared beneath the surface of the lava. The audience settled back into their seats. Kratine squeezed Janier's arm affectionately.

'You have passed a severe test, Princess,' he said. 'We grow closer at every turn. I know you are destined to be my emissary.' He put his hand on her back and spoke kindly. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

The chains that had bound Tier swung empty above the pit. I want to go home,' she whispered.

'Of course. You'll be there soon. Just as soon as you take off Chaneen's ring.'

Janier removed the ring from her finger, no longer able to resist. 'Can I go now?' she asked pitifully.

'Throw the ring into the mud,' Kratine said.

She intended to obey the order. But as she turned toward the lava, the ring slipped from her hands and landed on the black rock at her feet. She stooped to retrieve it, but Kratine stopped her.

'You don't need to touch it again,' he said. 'You're doing well.' Kratine paced in a circle around her. 'Tell me that you renounce your people.'

Why?'

'Say it.'

I renounce my people.'



Kratine smiled. His teeth were white and sharp. 'Excellent. Now say: "I forsake Rankar's protection."' Janier remained silent.

Kratine pointed at the lava. 'Have you not learned from your husband's example?'

She had to escape, she told herself. It was all that mattered. I forsake Rankar's protection,' she whispered.

'I forsake Chaneen's protection.' Janier could not speak.

Kratine shook his head. 'What a shame, that you should delay. Time is precious. Now you will have to say it loudly so that all my lovelies can hear.' He scraped her trembling lips with a long nail on his right hand. 'The words are such a small thing.'

'I forsake Chaneen's protection.'

'Louder.'

'I forsake Chaneen's protection!' Janier said.

'Wonderful. Now do you have any questions you would like to ask before you return home?'

'No.'

'Nothing you want to know?' Kratine asked.

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'What?' Kratine asked.

'Yes'

'Yes, Master.'

'Yes, Master,' Janier said.

He was close, and her hands were free. Janier realized if she acted quickly, she could probably shove him in the boiling mud. But she did nothing. All she could think about was getting away. She felt so afraid.

I myself have a question,' Kratine said slowly. 'Nothing really important, but a question I'd like you to answer as best you can.' He paused. 'Do you believe in your Master?'

I don't understand.'

'In me? I seem to recall you insinuating earlier that I had lied to you.'

'I'm sorry.'

I accept your apology. But let me explain why I ask the question. You indicated earlier that your people were noble and good, and that Asurians were disgusting and evil. Obviously you have such opinions because you are a moral woman. Your morality is what makes you human. Do you agree?'

She hesitated. 'Yes.'

'Very good. Now answer me this. In front of many witnesses, you renounced your people and forsook Rankar's and Chaneen's protection. Strong statements, I dare say.' He leaned forward and caressed the nape of her neck. 'But were you lying when you said those things?' Janier shook her head.

'Your sincerity is very important to me, Janier. Are you being completely honest with me?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

What if I told you I think you 're lying to me.'

I'm not.'

I think you are.'

'No, 'Janier said quickly. 'No.'

'Do you hate your King?'

'Yes.'

'Your people?' Kratine asked.

'Yes.'

'Your sister?'

'Yes! Yes!' Janier cried, lying over and over. Kratine had suddenly reached out and grabbed her throat once more, and now his nails tore into her flesh. Blood flowed from her neck onto the front of her white gown.

'You lie!' he shouted.

'No!'

'You try to deceive me!'

'I swear. No, Kratine!' He threw her to the floor, and she grappled at his feet. 'Don't hurt me. I'll do anything you say.'

Kratine's expression turned sad. 'Such a shame. I honestly believed for a moment there that you had opened your heart to me. Such a waste of beauty.' He motioned with his right hand to his aides. The chains that had held Tier above the lava swung their way. 'Such a shame,' Kratine repeated. The wrist clamps dangled in front of her eyes.

'What are you going to do?' Janier gasped.

'Surely you know.' He took the clamps and began to fit them around her wrists. She watched in horror, unable to resist.

'No,' she moaned.

'Yes, Princess.' He tightened the clamps securely. She tried to shake loose but she was too late. Kratine shook his head. 'This is a sad day for all of us,' he said.

She moved to her knees and tugged at his purple cloak, begging. 'Don't put me in there! I'll be your emissary! I'll do what you want!' Suddenly her arms were yanked straight in the air. 'No!'

They hoisted her above the pool of lava. Her arms popped at the joints and she kicked wildly, while all the time the audience laughed with pleasure. The mud bubbled beneath her feet and the heat scorched

her skin. Kratine stepped to the edge of the pit.

'Lower her,' he said.

Fumes poured into her mouth through her gasping breath and poisoned her lungs. She began to go down, into the pit, into the fire. Sparks flared and splattered her legs. Sweat mixed with blood poured off her forehead, and she knew she was going to die.

Inches above the boiling pool, however, Kratine bid his aides to halt her descent. 'Tell me that you hate the Sastra,' he said, 'and I will release you.'

'I hate the Sastra,' Janier whispered.

'Tell me that you hate Rankar. Say it with sincerity. That shouldn't be difficult. Hasn't he already failed you in your time of need?'

Janier began to cough and was unable to speak.

'Lower her further!' Kratine ordered.

Janier's foot touched the lava. The pain was immediate and overwhelming. She could smell her flesh burning. She screamed and screamed, unable to stop, even to beg her tormentor for mercy.

'Wouldn't you rather have me do this to someone else?' Kratine asked.

'Yes!' she cried.

'To Rankar for instance, if he was alive?'

'Yes!'

'You hate him, don't you? For causing you this pain?'

'Yes!'

And Janier did hate him. In her heart, she blamed her King for not having destroyed Kratine and his people in the first place.

'Most of all, you hate Chaneen,' Kratine said. 'She's responsible for

your being here. While you suffer, she cowers in the safety of her

Garden. I dare say she has forsaken you. Don't you hate her, Janier?

Tell me that you do, and I will let you go. Don't you hate her with all

your heart?'

'Yes!'

Kratine smiled. 'Excellent. I sense, finally, that you are sincere. You have passed another difficult test. I will keep my promise.' He gestured

to his aides. 'Bring my emissary away from her bath.'

Yet Kratine was wrong. Janier had lied to him the last time. She still loved her sister. She would never stop loving her sister.

Janier was swung away from the pool. She collapsed on the ground' as the clamps were removed from her wrists, unable to stand on her scorched feet. Kratine knelt by her side and stroked her back.

'Please don't kill me,' she whimpered.

'I won't,' he said gently. 'I love you, Janier. How could I destroy one I love so much? Don't fear, I'm going to make you immortal.'

She looked up, not understanding. 'Immortal?'

'Yes. I can do that for you now. You see, now you are like one of my children, like one of my own wives.' He gestured to the watching throng. I have many, you know. They sit in this chamber right now. They are the fairest in all of Asure. They have given me many pleasures. But none, I think, will have given me the pleasure you 're going to.' He tugged on her hair. 'Do you want to be one of my brides?' Janier froze.

He moved his hand and pulled at her gown near her hips. 'Don't you wish to be immortal? Certainly you don't want to die. I understand that. It's what makes us so alike. Our will to live. Do you understand?'



Janier shook her head. She tried slowly backing away. The crowd giggled. Kratine still had hold of her gown. He slowly pulled her back to him and patted her leg.

'You will understand,' he said. He stood and removed his cloak. 'I'm so proud of you. You have come so far. In your land you were only a Princess. Here, right now, you will become a Queen.'

Still, Janier did not understand what he meant. 'You said you were going to send me home,' she whispered.

Kratine ignored her for the moment and stepped to where he had deposited the eggshell. Taking the shell in his hands, he raised it to his lips and sipped the sickly green embryonic fluid. He swallowed with satisfaction, and returned to stand over her. He kept the eggshell in his hand.

'I'm glad you decided to join me, Janier. For a while there I didn't

know what I was going to do with the restrictions Rankar placed on my original plan.'

'Rankar?'

'Don't worry about him. The dead are dead. Besides, he isn't your King anymore. You forsook his protection, remember? I am your King. It's a good thing, too, for the Asurian future.' He sat by her side. 'Janier, are you aware of the passion you arouse in my royal blood?'

Janier shook her head timidly. Now she understood. 'No,' she whispered.

'Well, then let me show you.' He grabbed her gown and ripped it across the top. The cloth tumbled from her shoulders. Kratine licked his lips as he stared at her naked breasts. 'Excellent,' he said.

She wept. 'Why are you doing this?'

'It's necessary, and I enjoy it,' Kratine replied. I always enjoy my duty. But I could never explain to you the importance of my taking you as a bride, the profound significance of what we've done here today. The young can never understand the pains of old age: the loss of one's vitality and power. The young can never understand death. To them it always seems so far away. But for me, for too long, it has been close at hand. I'm not one to complain, though. I'm not concerned with problems. I'm concerned with solutions. Yes, even with the solution to old age and death. I assure you, I have discovered such a solution.' He shook his head sadly. 'Unfortunately, there are now too few Sastra left alive to carry out the full scope of my plan. Too many died in the war. You might be surprised to hear I didn't even want to go to war with your people. Be that as it may, there's no sense complaining about what has happened. The day may be lost but tomorrow looks bright. The future is full of promise. Chaneen's children will survive the blow I have dealt them. They will flourish over their lands, forgetting much of their ancestry, and losing many of their powers. But they will learn new ways of accomplishing what they want, and one day, one great day, they will come here. And on that day, they will be mine. Do you understand?'

'No,' Janier whispered.

'It doesn't matter.' He stood and motioned to his aides. Instantly a dozen Asurian bitches emerged from the shadows and pinned her to the floor. They stripped her naked and yanked her legs apart. Kratine tipped the eggshell above her, ready to pour the embryonic fluid over her bare flesh.

'You can't do this!' she screamed.

Kratine snickered. I can't? Even at this late stage in the game you fail to guess what I can do. You would have fared better, Princess, to have jumped in the pit when you had the chance.'

Janier struggled with what strength was left in her body against his brides, to no avail. 'Stop,' she cried.

Kratine stared down at her. 'You are the scourge of your kind, Janier. You are the mother of the curse I now lay upon the Sastra. In time Chaneen's children will come to hate you, and I will triumph. My seed will bear fruit. I shall be immortal.' Kratine began to unbuckle his gold girdle with the hand that was not holding the eggshell.

'Don't touch me!' Janier yanked her head from side to side. 'Chaneen! Chaneen, save me!'

Kratine regarded her sympathetically. 'You were tricked, Janier. From the very beginning, you have been a fool. This has all been an elaborate ritual. There were worshipers present. I was the priest. You are the sacrifice. Now we will consecrate the sacrament.' Kratine tossed aside his girdle and his illusion of human form began to dissolve.

Janier twisted her body off the floor, but was thrown back down. The shouts from the audience grew louder. 'But you said you would send me home,' she said, sobbing. I want to go home.' 'I lied,' Kratine said. 'Are you going to rape me?'

I am going to love you,' he said with a grin. I am going to plant my seed, and then I'm going to make you take your bath.'

Kratine's human flesh vanished. A hideous monster stood in its place. He was scaled, and coated with mucus. He had claws for hands and horns for ears. A roving black snake uncoiled between his legs as it searched for the place to enter her. Kratine tilted the broken eggshell and

the embryonic fluid splashed over her body. Immediately her skin seethed with pain as it began to rot on her bones. The crowd began to chant a one-line prayer that echoed in her shaking head like a curse that would go to the end of time.

Then Kratine climbed on top of her, and entered her, and nothing could have been worse.

'It's me, my love,' he said in a voice that belonged to her late husband. 'Only me.'

Janier opened her eyes and saw Kratine had put on an illusion of Tier's face. Quickly she shut her eyes, but he forced open her mouth and bit her tongue and sucked on her blood. Then the stagnant cold sprayed inside her, and the blood in her mouth cracked into ice. A numb wave of a million piercing needles crawled through her limbs and into her head.

Janier began to die.

Kratine suddenly pulled away, and kicked her, and spat on her. Perhaps he had not enjoyed his lovemaking as much as he had hoped. He spoke with disgust. 'Hang this witch for her bath!'

Janier could not breathe. She was cold, so cold.

Kratine's aides snapped the clamps on her wrists and went to hoist her above the lava. Only now she was heavy as stone and she slipped from their grasp and crashed back onto the black altar. It was then she felt Chaneen's ring pressing into her shivering flesh. Somehow, blocking the move from Kratine's eyes, she managed to slip the ring back onto her finger.

Now if only she could die, she thought, and stop the cold.

They yanked her into the air again. Her arms were twisted behind her back and she heard the bones snap inside. The huge dark chamber spun around her. The boiling mud now bubbled beneath her feet.

Then her eyes fell on Kratine for the last time. He had returned to his black throne and reclothed himself in human form - down to the last detail. He had human eyes now, blue eyes like hers.

'The future will be ours,' he said. He gestured to his assistants. 'Lower her slowly.'

The lava hissed as it touched her skin. Her feet fused into blackened

stumps. Her shins disintegrated as her knees smoked. Yet still the terrible cold remained, the cold of Kratine's seed, the curse that he said would one day awaken. Nothing seemed able to stop the cold.

All was not lost, however. Kratine had also been fooled. A spark of life remained with Janier. In the last instant before the red mud closed over her, Princess Janier held aloft her sister's ring and said, 'Remember me, Chaneen.'

## TWENTY-SIX

In the basement of the Hawk, on a cold Martian morning, Dr Lauren Wagner watched impatiently as Major Gary Wheeler worked a fine blue torch over the edge of the steel case that housed a thermonuclear warhead.

The passing minutes were hard on Lauren. Dazed and confused, Jessica had left with her husband forty minutes earlier. Lauren herself had just returned from the Karamazov with the laser.

'What's taking you so long?' she demanded. 'Is that all you've done?'

'If I don't go slow,' Gary growled, 'I might trigger the damn thing.'

'If we don't get going, it won't matter if you do.'

'I'm terribly sorry, but this bomb wasn't fitted for quick removal.'

'Just leave it,' Lauren said. 'I told you, it will only slow us down.'

Gary readjusted his dark goggles. 'I'm going to burn the heart out of this bastard planet and nothing's going to stop me.'

'But what about Jessie?'

'I'm going as fast as I can!'

'That isn't good enough! I just can't stand here while she's down there with that monster.'

'Then do something else, and get out of my hair,' Gary said. 'Decipher Dmitri's diary. I don't know why you haven't done so already.'

'Well, I had to bury a dear friend. Or have you forgotten that already?'

'Just do it,' Gary ordered. 'We don't have time for self-pity.'

Mars gave a sudden sharp lurch. Lauren was almost thrown from her feet. The hull of the Hawk groaned loudly.

Earthquake. Marsquake.

The tremor ended as quickly as it began. Gary had turned off his torch and pushed up his goggles. There were lines on his face Lauren couldn't have imagined a few days ago.

'Jim said that Olympus Mons was active,' Gary said.

'You think it's about to erupt?'

'Maybe.'

'Just because we're here?'

'Maybe.'

Lauren sighed. 'I'm sorry. I know you're doing the best you can. I know you don't need a nag to listen to.'

Gary wiped at the salt that had crusted his cracked lips. 'You're doing OK, Doc. Did you have a bad night?'

Lauren leaned her aching head against the wall, feeling pressure inside and out. Her thirst was becoming as pressing as her need to breathe. 'I had a real winner,' she said. 'But I suppose it's going to get worse before it gets better. I'll work on Dmitri's diary.'

'Good. Friend's tongue has been bitten off, but Bill hasn't totally sabotaged his brain - probably because he needs the computer to take off. Punch in a basic program and see if you can get a translation on the screen.'

'All right.' She stepped to the ladder.

'And keep an eye to the east,' Gary said. 'For the wicked witches. Yeah, I know.' Lauren sat in the control room in front of one of Friend's consoles, with Dmitri's diary resting in her lap. The Hawk's portholes were open, and out of the corner of her eye she could just see the opening to the cave that led deep into the mountain. She thumbed through the pages of the book. Fortunately Dmitri's handwriting was precise; most of the letters were actually printed. She decided to start translating from October 28, 2002. That was when the cosmonauts had landed on Mars. Hoping a part of Friend still lived up to his name, she typed: Clear for new programming. Level A. [Level A clear.]

Translate input from Russian to English. [Programmed.]

She read the blue word of acceptance with relief. The screen split into two halves, with a top and bottom. Each Russian word she put in at the top would appear at the bottom in English.

Lauren picked up the scanner and began to scan the pages into the computer, reading the translation as she went along.



10,28:1 am afraid my first entry on this new world must be brief. Perhaps all my notes will be sketchy for we have much work to do. I am excited as I write this. We are on Mars! The landing was accomplished without difficulty. The Katarina consumed more fuel than we would have preferred, but we are still in fine shape for when we leave. I couldn't have hoped for fewer problems. This is truly a great day for mankind. As I sit here, my eyes are constantly drawn to the pink sky, and to Olympus Mons. The mountain is unlike any I have seen on Earth. Its size is incredible, and its wide

circular summit looks almost as if it were built. I am reminded of our purpose in coming here, but would still be surprised if we find any signs of life. I have always felt Moscow overreacted to the red lights the Inspector spotted from orbit on this plateau. Nicholas is still of the opinion that the lights were volcanic flares and nothing else. Yet if the flares only served to bring us here, then I am content.

I received a special note from Anna today. She says there is great celebration at home. Alex has become a hero at school for having me as a father. Katherine is also getting much attention. Here we have been too busy to properly celebrate our accomplishment, although Ivan did say before he went to bed tonight that we ought to have a toast. To my surprise, he said that he has smuggled two bottles of vodka aboard for the occasion. I can't reprimand him. I still have my bottle of 'eighty-nine French wine. Perhaps we can have a toast of wine and vodka when we have successfully completed our exploration.

10, 29: Today we spent the bulk of our time unfolding and setting up our solar panels. They are working as well as our scientists promised. It is a relief not to have to depend solely upon our fuel for power.

This landscape often reminds me of my days at Uralski Khrebet, where I did my geological training. The ruggedness is similar. The sunset this evening was beautiful, a deep red sky cut with tunnels of purple and gold. Anna says we are the most popular show on TV.

We made an exciting discovery today. There is a cave at the eastern end of the plateau that has remarkably smooth walls. It appears to go back a long way. Tomorrow Ivan will head an exploration to see where it leads.

I slept poorly last night. I am feeling tired now. I must go to bed.

10, 30: Ivan has found that the cave goes down into the

mountain for a great distance. Nicholas reports that its walls are remarkably smooth. Naturally he refuses even to consider that the cave is the work of intelligence. Ivan had to cut short his exploration - we had begun to lose his radio signal. Tomorrow we plan a more intensive exploration of the place using relay beacons and the tractor. There appears to be room for the vehicle, if we can but overcome a small hill that stands at the mouth of the cave.

I visited the Karamazov today. Alyosha had reported feeling ill, and I went with Gregory to have him examined. Gregory says Alyosha appears only fatigued. He prescribed sleeping pills. I may take a pill tonight, myself. I have been having an unusual amount of bad dreams. But I can never remember them when I wake up.

Carl called several times today. He says he is lonely, which made me smile. Carl seldom spoke on the journey here, and appeared anxious to have privacy.

I find myself missing Anna tonight. I will tape another message for her before I go to bed.

10, 31: There are canals on Mars! Ivan and Nicholas took the tractor three miles into the cave and discovered a tunnel full of water.

I was surprised at first when they told me what they had discovered. I thought they were joking. Nicholas explained that the atmospheric pressure had mounted steadily the deeper they went. The pressure is approximately one-tenth Earth's where the cave ends above the canal.

Moscow has ordered us to explore the cave using one or both of our hovercraft. I just returned from the Karamazov after inspecting the vehicles. I am not pleased with the order. I feel it is dangerous - I want to move more slowly. Since Moscow will not allow me personally to explore the canal, Ivan will go in my stead. I will choose his partner tomorrow.

Despite our exciting discovery, the morale of the men is

low. We are all having trouble sleeping. Tensions are increasing. Twice today I had to break up arguments. My men are clinging to each other, and at the same time pushing each other away. I reported the trouble to Moscow, but they did not seem interested.

I find myself longing to see blue sky again, or even the starry black of space. The Martian scenery, although still beautiful, has begun to depress me for reasons I don't understand.

Thankfully Alyosha is feeling better. Perhaps I will send him with Ivan tomorrow.

11, 1: I spent the day supervising the fueling of the hovercraft at the end of the cave, beside the canal. This was my first direct experience with the watery tunnel. It is massive, and I had trouble believing it was really there.

I have been wondering if our solar panels were working properly. I have been cold lately, even though our thermostats report a normal range of temperature. Several of the men have also reported a chill. I discussed the matter with Gregory, and he is worried we might have caught an infection. This has given me cause for anxiety. We also seem unreasonably thirsty, although we drink more liquids than we need. I have ordered Gregory to examine everyone closely. At present he is in the laboratory below me, conducting his tests.

I had a strange hallucination just now. I glanced up from my diary, out the porthole, and thought I saw something walking in the dark. It appeared a foot shorter than a man, but with a wide snouted face and eyes that shone with a dull red light. I was on the verge of calling for Ivan when it vanished. But I know it was a hallucination. There are no footprints in the sand outside my window, and the thing I saw reminds me of the creatures in the nightmares that have been bothering me since we landed. So I know it was only in my mind.

11, 2: Today is very sad for all of us. Ivan and Alyosha went up the canal in the hovercraft and never returned. They • must be dead by now. Their air supply would have run out two hours ago.

After traveling for several miles over the water, they came to a huge cavern. I told them to stop and send up a flare. In the brief light we saw a land mass approximately two kilometers distant, surrounded by water. I had no choice but to follow my superiors' orders and send them forward. Somehow their communications jammed, and we were unable to reach them. Ivan should have turned back, but he was always the adventurous one. I sent the second hovercraft to look for them, but it was hours behind; it had to refuel at the end of the cave before it set out over the water. Nicholas led the second expedition, and he was able to find and retrieve the first hovercraft, but he discovered no bodies.

I can't help feeling bitter over what has happened. Had Moscow been in less of a hurry, we could have undertaken a more systematic exploration of the canal, and minimized our risks. Ivan was a good friend . Thankfully, he has no family. I doubt if the message I sent Alyosha's wife will be of much comfort. I doubt if she will even receive it.

I am exhausted. Today has been a great strain. I hope for once that I am able to sleep without nightmares.

11, 3: Ivan is alive! Nicholas found him while exploring the island today. Right now my dear friend is again sleeping on the bed beside the desk on which I write. My joy is great. If only Alyosha had survived, too. Ivan says Alyosha accidentally fell into a volcanic fissure they had discovered. Ivan is anxious to show me the place where our comrade was lost. Of course, I won't be permitted to go for the time being, but I will send Nicholas with Ivan tomorrow. Ivan cannot stop talking about how amazing this place is. It is odd, though. He talks about it constantly but he doesn't seem to

say anything. I can't understand how he can be so enthusiastic about a place where Alyosha lost his life.

Gregory also reminded me of something else that has been bothering me. Ivan's air supply should have run out. He should be dead. Gregory suggested that Alyosha sacrificed his oxygen for Ivan to live. But when I asked Ivan if this had been the case, he got angry, for a moment. Then he quickly smiled and said that Alyosha hadn't sacrificed a damn thing.

11, 4: It is the middle of the night. Ivan and Nicholas explored the island today and returned safely near sunset. They hinted that they had found something remarkable, and I was excited. I quizzed them at length for my report to Moscow, but they were vague about what they had seen. They just kept saying I had to see the place for myself, when they know it is against my orders to go down there.

Yet Moscow seems pleased with the progress of our mission. They suggest that I send two teams to the island tomorrow. I discussed the idea with Ivan and Nicholas, but they were against it. They said it would be too risky. But they did suggest that they be allowed to continue with the exploration themselves, with the addition of one, maybe two, men. Since they are familiar with the island, I agreed.

I am tired now, but can't sleep. I don't want to sleep. Every time I doze off, I feel a weight on my chest and have difficulty breathing. Gregory says he can find no signs of infection in our blood. Nevertheless, everyone is complaining of chills and thirst. We have set the thermostat at eighty-five degrees and we are still cold.

Gregory asked if he can accompany Ivan and Nicholas tomorrow. He told me he suspects our problems may somehow be related to the canal water. That does not seem logical to me. We had a host of symptoms before we discovered the canal. Plus Ivan is the only one who is sleeping properly, and he has spent more time down there

than anybody. Even as I write these words, he is fast asleep on the bed beside me. In fact, he doesn't even snore anymore.

11, 5: Again my men returned from the island without incident. I should be relieved, but if anything my anxiety is increasing. When I questioned them about what they found, they just say I must visit the place and see for myself. I keep hearing the same story.

Somehow those who return from that dark place are different. For example, Ivan is always smiling, but he does not seem happy. Plus they all stay together, and talk in whispers among themselves. Gregory, who accompanied Ivan and Nicholas today, laughed when I tried to reopen the discussion on the possibility of infection. Something terrible is happening to my crew, but I do not know what it is, or how I can stop it.

I hesitate to tell Moscow of my fears. I have no proof to substantiate what I am feeling. Anyway, Moscow is pushing for further exploration of the island. It would not matter what I told them. They are not as pleased with us anymore. They are becoming irritated with the lack of information my men are returning with. They have ordered me to send different people, along with a couple who are experienced with the island. I think, for the first time in my life, I am going to disobey an order.

Carl has been on the radio all day. He says he is lonely and wants to go home. He even began to weep while talking to me. He is suffering from nightmares, too. He says he hates having Mars outside his porthole all the time. He says the red is hurting his eyes.

I received a message from Anna today. I am beginning to doubt I will ever see her again.

11, 6: We have lost contact with the Gorbachev, and therefore with Earth. Both the Katarina's and the Karamazov's

communications systems have been overloaded by a sudden power surge from our main generators. Repair is out of the question. This could not have happened by accident. I haven't slept in two days. I feel I will be murdered if I do. I know Ivan and those he has

taken to that forsaken place are responsible for the sabotage. I am reminded of how Ivan survived without air. How easily I accepted that impossibility! I write these words sitting up in my bed, and I listen to Ivan sleeping below me. Not only does he no longer snore, he no longer breathes.

When I was young, my grandmother told my sister and me ghost stories. Some of these tales were of people, or things, that came back from the dead. Of course, she was very old at the time, and a little senile, but as a child I believed her stories. Now tonight, on this alien world, I believe her once again.

If only I had told Moscow of my fears. Now there can be no warning for those who should follow us here. I feel sorry for those people.

Lauren stopped translating, afraid to go on, perhaps afraid to discover her own fate. Good old Ivan - he had been the first as well as the last.

She glanced in the direction of the haunted cave and opened a circuit to the basement.

'How are you doing?' she asked.

'I have the bomb free,' Gary said. 'It's not too heavy to carry around, not here on Mars.'

'Can we go? I'll be right down.'

'No. I have to put a second timer on it. The original one is too easy to tamper with. Plus it can't be set for anything above ten minutes.'

'How long will all this take?'

'I'm not sure. A few minutes.'

'Where in God's name are you going to find a timer that you can just hook onto the bomb?'

'I have one already. It's not as complicated as it sounds. I've already triggered the code, but I've prevented the circuit from being completed. Honestly, I should be done in five minutes. What does Dmitri have to say?'

'All his men that traveled to the island turned into monsters that didn't have to breathe. Except for Alyosha. It seems he didn't take to the new brotherhood. Jim probably didn't, either. There's only one entry left. Should I continue to translate or do you want me to stop and help you?'

'You can't help. Finish the translation. Have you found out anything that gives us a better idea of what we're facing?'

Lauren considered a moment. 'No.'

'Well, I guess it'll be good to know what happened.'

'I guess so,' she agreed. 'Hurry with your work.'

Lauren started on the last day.



11, 7: I pray that you who discover this record will not make the mistake of thinking me insane. If you do, then the evil on this planet that turns men into walking corpses will invade the Earth. Above all else, that must not happen. We should never have come to this place.

I don't have much time. I must explain what happened today. My dearest friends are now aliens. They smile constantly, with vacant eyes that remind me of animals. I feel a strange power in them, a cold hatred.

I decided our only chance was more medical tests. Since I no longer trust Gregory, I had his assistant, Fyodor, subject all of us to physical exams. Fyodor has never been to the canal or the island. But as he listened to my heart beat, I

noticed his smiling expression. Where his hands touched my skin, I felt a disquieting chill. I asked if he was feeling well, and he laughed and said he had never been better. That made me suspicious. Fyodor had been feeling miserable like the rest of us. I asked him if he had examined Ivan and found anything unusual. He said no. I pointed out that Ivan no longer appeared to breathe. At that Fyodor laughed again, and said that must mean he's dead. Then he offered me a bottle of water and suggested I drink it immediately, for my system was dehydrated.

I smelled the water and detected a faint, nauseating odor. To the touch, the liquid felt different than water. It was thicker, and it stuck to my fingers like glue. It also gave me a slight burn. I asked Fyodor where he got the water and he told me Ivan had given it to him. He also said that it was delicious stuff. I ordered him to continue his examinations and left for the control room.

Once there I considered the idea that Fyodor had been changed, like the others, but without having visited the island. I felt anxious about having placed my uncontaminated men in his hands. I turned on a remote camera that viewed the laboratory. There I watched as Fyodor withdrew a blood sample from Peter. At first Fyodor appeared to do nothing unusual. Then he attached a tourniquet and IV to Peter's arm. He explained that he needed an exceptionally large amount of blood for a special experiment he wanted to perform. Peter agreed reluctantly. After Fyodor was done with him, Peter left the laboratory, and then Ivan appeared.

What happened next was terrible. Fyodor handed Ivan Peter's blood. He bowed as he did so, and thanked Ivan for the opportunity of decision. Ivan took the beaker and made a toast in the direction of my camera - he must have known I was watching. Then Ivan drank down the blood and gave the

empty beaker back to Fyodor. Ivan promised him that soon his thirst would be quenched.

My old friend drank Peter's blood!

I checked our weapons locker. The rifles and lasers are gone. The weapons the Katarina carried are also gone. They are way ahead of me.

I have called for a meeting at the Katarina tonight. I believe they will come - they seem to fear nothing. There is only one way of stopping this plague. Ivan's remark about quenching their thirst haunts me. Fortunately he does not know of the weapon we carry that is far more powerful than the missing lasers and rifles.

I have fed a program into the Karamazov's computer that cannot be overridden. This ship will never leave this world, but it is my hope that she will continue to serve mankind by protecting this record. Whoever should read this - leave this place before it is too late.

I wish I could see Anna one last time. I wish I could get a message off to Carl. He will have a lonely journey home.

I have to go now. They are coming.

Lauren closed the diary and shut her eyes. Now she desperately wanted to leave Jessica. She longed to blast off and get back to Earth and warn everybody. She didn't want to be given the opportunity of decision.

Gary came in over the radio. 'I'm ready, Doc. We can leave now.'

She squeezed Dmitri's diary. At least it felt warm. 'OK.'

'Did you find out anything?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Gary,' she said. 'Let's make a couple of crosses before we go down there. They couldn't hurt.'

Coming, Lori?

TWENTY-SEVEN

The boat was where they had left it, floating on the canal at the end of the cave two hundred feet below the edge of the cliff. The rope ladder that led down to the water was also in place, and they climbed down into the boat without difficulty. Lauren found paddling a relief after the long walk. Her injured knee had swollen to twice its proper size - another waste of precious moisture. Yet the black waters that surrounded them no longer tempted her.

'Where did you get this water, Fyodor?'

'Ivan gave it to me. It's delicious.'

'When we get back home, Lori,' Gary said, breathing hard inside his suit, 'I'm going to take you surfing in Tahiti. You can lie on an empty beach all day and let the hot sun bake your beautiful body a sexy brown.'

She sighed. 'Tahiti - it's a place I can hardly imagine anymore. I can't even imagine a warm sun in this hellhole. We should all go there. Jenny loves the water. Terry does, too.'

You remember Terry? That's my fiancé. We're engaged.

'It'll be great,' Gary said quickly. 'All of us will go, yeah.'

'I wonder how Ivan escaped Dmitri's trap,' she said.

'I'm more curious about how he became possessed in the first place. He didn't have someone to show him the way.'

Lauren recalled her last day in the forest in Wyoming. She had fallen asleep in front of Terry's cabin and had had a horrible nightmare. She had awoken with a start, with Jennifer asking whose name she had called. (Whose name had she called?) Then and there, millions of miles away, the attack on her had begun; all those weird voices in her head - I see you brought the fire, and bizarre stuff like that. It was Mars trying to take over. Jim had hit the nail right on the head when he said the infection wasn't physical. The monster sucked on your mind before it drank your blood. Of course, you had to invite them in - all the stories said that. You had to make a decision.

'Mars was probably all Ivan needed,' Lauren said in response to Gary's comment.

Gary nodded. 'I hope we don't flip out in that cave.'

After they had been paddling for about an hour, Lauren noticed a sudden series of ripples crisscrossing the canal. She wasn't sure, but had the wall just jerked?

'Gary?' she said.

'What?'

'Did you notice anything unusual a second ago?'

'No. Why?'

'I think there was another earthquake.'

'I wouldn't be surprised.'

'Yeah,' she muttered. They continued to paddle forward. Yet something nagged at the back of Lauren's mind. The cavern up ahead held a large body of water. How large they did not know for sure. It could be as large as an ocean.

Lauren paused to adjust the reception on her vocals up to maximum. Now every sound was like thunder in her ear: her breathing, the splash of the water, her heartbeat. Yet faintly, far away, she could hear the roar of something large and dangerous approaching.

A tidal wave!

'Gary!'

'Huh?'

'Turn your vocals all the way up!'

He did so. 'Oh, shit! This planet is trying to kill us.'

'What should we do?' She cut her receivers back to normal; nevertheless, the wave could still be heard, echoing in the black with the hollow sound of certain death.

'The sides of the canal will be solid white wash,' Gary said. 'We've got to get to the middle.'

With one powerful stroke, Gary pivoted the boat. They paddled frantically towards the center of the canal. The noise grew louder and louder. Yet they could see absolutely nothing in front of them.

'Is this the middle?' she shouted over the din a minute later.

'I don't know!' Gary stopped paddling and shot off a flare. The glare was blinding, but they saw enough to know that they were still far from the center. In the distance, a dark wall, wreathed at the side with cascading foam, stormed toward them.

They tried to increase their distance from the wall. Unfortunately Lauren was nervous; she couldn't keep up with Gary's strokes. Their rhythm went out of sync, and the raft veered to the side. They began to spin in circles. Lauren tried correcting the situation but only made matters worse. Finally Gary turned and shook his head. He indicated she should set aside her paddle and brace herself. She couldn't have heard him had he spoken, the roar was deafening now. He shot off a second flare in the direction of the tsunami. In the brief dawn that followed they saw a mountain of water, at least forty feet high, churning with an avalanche of white foam, ready to sweep away their puny boat.

As the flare died, however, Lauren saw that the swell was intact in the middle. There was hope. She gripped the sides of the boat as hard as she could.

A moment later her heart was stuffed into her stomach as the boat was grabbed by an all-powerful hand and tossed upward. The passage of the water was so swift, it actually threw them several feet off the surface. They landed with a sharp jar, and Lauren feared the force would rupture the bottom of their boat. When she opened her eyes, though, the boat seemed intact, although it rocked violently on the foam left behind by the tidal wave.

'Maybe we won't go surfing in Tahiti,' Gary gasped.

'We'll just wet our feet,' Lauren said, trying to catch her breath.

The remainder of their watery journey passed without incident. At the mysterious island, Gary secured the boat and climbed onto the drenched shore with the bomb hugged close to his chest. Lauren followed closely, carrying the laser. It did not take them long to locate Jim's original phosphorescent markers. They proceeded inland, and quickly the island's spell of fear began to work on them. Lauren underwent a profound change in point of view. She was going to shoot at anything that moved, she decided. Jessica would just have to take her chances.

They came to the pool where Ivan's remains lay scattered in bloody leaps. Incredibly, his eyes were still open, and the obscene grin remained on his mouth. Gary kicked the head into the water, where it slowly sank beneath the black surface.

Good luck, Lori. Be sure to write when you get home.

They pushed into the hills. At the spot where Jessica had fallen, the markers came to an end. They had no choice but to send up a flare, destroying their chances of surprise. In the burning light, approximately a mile distant, they saw a tall hill, topped with a distinctive plateau. They decided it

was probably the monsters' clubhouse.

Not long afterward, they huddled together in the center of the barren plateau. There they found a hole that appeared to lead downward. It was time for them to be fascinated. Lauren went in first, ready at every turn of the steep jagged cave to fire her laser. Gary followed two inches at her back; there was not enough room to walk abreast.

Lauren sensed heat. A faint red light began to glow up ahead. It was a peculiar shade, very depressing. Something about it said quite firmly that there was no going back. Even if you were sorry that you hadn't been born a believer. The crucifix that swung around the neck of her pressure suit - two plastic sticks stuck together with medical tape - didn't glow with the white light promised in the books on vampires. If she died in this pit, she thought, and if she did have a soul, it would never get out.

The narrow cave ended abruptly. They emerged into a fascinating room. It was shrouded in fog, bloody eddies of vapor that whirled in hypnotic circles. Pools of dark water and bubbling soups of red mud weaved around the floor. Although Lauren breathed bottled air, the stench was overwhelming - maggots consuming a corpse that had lain too many days beneath a hot humid sun. Sudden despair entered her heart, and she had to hug the wall to keep herself from jumping in the pits of lava.



Then I'm going to make you take your bath.

The floor was made of the same black substance as the floor of the cave, but the walls were gray and uneven, apparently softer and undoubtedly younger. Gary indicated they should explore the perimeter of the room. Lauren crept forward slowly, scanning the fog for the least trace of motion. According to Gary's horror books - and they were the only reference material that spoke even

indirectly about what they were facing and she might as well admit it - the vampires' reflexes were blindingly fast. Constant anticipation had stretched Lauren into a taut wire. When Gary touched her arm a few minutes later, she whirled and almost blew his head off.

'Oh!' she cried. Then, 'Shit. Don't do that again.'

Gary glanced at the tip of the weapon pointed at his chest. He pushed it away. 'Shh,' he said. 'Look there. Jim's tools.'

At her feet were Jim's favorite hammer, chisel, and brush. He must have been working here when he died, she thought. She glanced back the way they had come and decided, by the curve of the wall, that they were on the far side of the room, opposite the entrance. Gary stepped a few feet toward the center of the room and began to ready the warhead not far from a pool of glowing mud. Lauren knelt to collect Jim's tools.

It was then she saw the ring.

It was a simple silver band embedded halfway in the stone wall. Although flecked with gray dust, it appeared to shine with a soft white light that had nothing to do with demons and hell.

'We've all read fantasy stories about magical rings and the wonderful powers they give to those who possess them. I guess being where I was, I believed those stories could come true.'

Perhaps they had come true for Jim, this time.

Even the possibility of vampires hadn't challenged Lauren's sense of reality as much as did the sight of the ring.

'Gary!'

He came up at her shoulder. 'What?'

'Look,' she said. 'It's Jim's ring - Jenny's ring. It's here on Mars!'

'Mother Jesus,' Gary whispered.

This must also be the Russian dig Bill had spoken of, Lauren thought. The Russians, however, had not removed the ring from the stone, merely uncovered it, which she found odd. She tugged at the silver band. It was stuck, but she figured they should be able to get it free. A curved finger of stone wrapped through the center of it. Lauren reached for Jim's chisel. Gary stopped her and shook his head.

'We don't have time,' he said. 'I've already started the timer on the warhead. Leave the ring. It could be dangerous.'

'No,' she said firmly. Already she had fallen under the spell of the ring, for it reminded her of Earth, and of her sister. The dread that had weighed on her heart since they entered the pit was cast back at a distance. She told herself she would take the ring and bring it back home. 'I want it,' she said.

'We don't have time,' Gary protested.

'Why did you have to be so stupid and start the timer?'

'I didn't want you pleading that we had to stay and find Jessie. Too long in this place and we're going to flip out. Can you believe that smell? How is it getting through our suits?'

'I think it's all in our heads. Can't you stop the timer?'

'No,' Gary said. 'The bomb would explode. I rigged the trigger that way so's it couldn't be tampered with.'

'That's just fucking great.' She grabbed Jim's tools. 'I'm still going to get the ring. It'll only take me a moment.'

Gary stood indecisive for a moment. Then he took the chisel and hammer from her hand. 'I guess this was a job Jim didn't get to finish.'

'Careful,' she said, as Gary began to chip around the ring. 'Don't hurt it.' A deep longing to touch the ring pushed aside her fears. Gary continued to work around the

band. Lauren noticed it was smaller than the one Jim had given Jennifer; it was sized more for a lady's finger.

A portion of the wall suddenly crumbled to the floor, revealing another incredible sight.

The bones of a human hand!

The outline was clear to Lauren's trained eye. She grabbed Gary's hand, stopping him. The bones were fossilized, and encased in a fine yellow coating. She took the chisel from Gary and carefully exposed more of the dead hand that held the ring.

'Do you know what this is, Gary?' she asked finally.

'No.'

'A human skeleton.'

'You're sure?'

'I'm sure.'

Gary's voice trembled with emotion. 'Is it possible that humans once lived here?'

She did not know the answer, nor was she given a chance to think of one. A tiny stone crunched softly at their backs. In one smooth motion, Lauren spun and brought up the laser, pointing it directly at Bill.

'Gary,' she said.

Bill stood in the red fog beside the warhead, his face hidden by a shadow that crossed the front of his helmet. Ignoring them for a moment, he knelt and touched the metal casing that held enough power to destroy the entire island.

I see you brought the fire.

The thought was filled with both fear and respect. Lauren knew it had passed through what was left of Bill's mind along with her own.

'No,' Bill said, his voice soft and deep. 'It's not like you think.' He looked directly at them. 'Humans never lived here.'

Gary regained his voice. 'Shoot, Lori!'

Lauren shook her head. 'I can't. He's too close to the bomb. It could go off.'

'You have a point there,' Gary muttered. He left her side and slowly drifted to the right. Something in the depths of Bill's eyes flickered. A faint smile touched his lips. He focused his attention on Lauren.

'Why are you pointing that gun at me?' he asked.

'The game's over,' Lauren said. 'You're not Bill.'

'Are you sure?' he asked gently.

Three simple words - yet they filled her head with doubts, never mind all that she had seen. Was the fog clearing? Strange how she could see Bill's face better, particularly his eyes. He had such fascinating eyes. They were two featureless black points. They did not really frighten her, not as she stared into them. They were actually quite interesting, in their own special way. Lauren shook her head, trying to clear it. But the eyes quickly drew her back.

'You're not Bill,' she said again.

'No Lori?' he said. He held out an arm and bent his elbow, then his wrist, inspecting his limbs. 'You must be wrong. Of course I'm your friend. Who else could I be? I have his body, his mind and memories. Just look at me, Lori. Don't you remember me?'

'Yes,' she said. The voice was definitely familiar, she thought, even though it was not her commander's. It was the voice of someone she'd known a long long time ago. 'I remember you,' she whispered.

'No!' Gary called. He had positioned himself to her right, Bill's left, standing at the apex of their shifting triangle. 'Don't listen to him.'

Her guard went back up. 'I won't be tricked,' she said.

'Why should I lie to you?' Bill asked.

'Where is Jessie?' Lauren demanded. 'What have you done to her?'

'She is not far.'

'You murdered Jim!'

Bill made a sweeping gesture. 'I have come to understand this chamber to be a place of decision. I didn't harm Jim. You're wrong to threaten me.'

The autopsy had said he had died of a heart attack. Lauren was curious in spite of herself. 'What decision did Jim make?'

'There is only one.'

'What are the choices?' she asked.

'To live or to die. You could live forever, Lori.'

She put pressure on the laser's trigger. 'Not your way.'

Bill went to yank the warhead's fuse.

'Stop!' she cried.

Bill's smile widened. 'What is your decision, Lori?'

Lauren glanced out the corner of her eye. Gary was edging closer to Bill. Was he going to try to push Bill in the lava? Bill paid Gary absolutely no heed.

'You didn't answer me, Lori,' Bill said.

'Detonate the bomb and you will die, too,' she said.

'Does that matter?' Bill asked. 'You think I'm dead already. You're mistaken there, I might add.'

'You're worse than dead,' Lauren said.

'What could be worse?' Bill asked. Again he reached for the bomb's timer.

'No!' she shouted.

Bill nodded. 'You want to discuss the situation further before you decide. I understand. One shouldn't be in a hurry to choose oblivion.'

'There could be a third choice,' Lauren said. 'I can still live and not become like you.'

Bill shook his head. 'Not once you've come here.'

'You're a coward,' she said bitterly. 'You made a cowardly decision. Jim could have been like you, but he didn't want to harm us.'



'But he's dead.'

'He wasn't afraid of you,' Lauren said.

'Not like you,' Bill agreed.

'You're a liar. Humans were here before.' She pointed to the wall. 'How do you explain how this ring got here?'

'The ring is of no consequence,' Bill said.

'Then why did your kind uncover it? You were looking for it. But none of you took it out of the wall. I think you're afraid of it.'

'Your thoughts are of no consequence,' Bill said.

'Jim told us about a ring like this,' Lauren said.

The smile dropped from Bill's face. 'What did he tell you?'

Lauren took a step back. 'A human skeleton holds this ring. It belongs to us, not to you.'

'What did Jim tell you?' Bill insisted, angry now.

Lauren took another step backward, finding it difficult to resist his demand. 'Nothing,' she whispered.

'Tell me!' Bill said.

His wrath hit her like a cold blast. His eyes, completely blank moments ago, were now windows into a place where the penalty of disobedience could be clearly seen. Lauren shuddered as she bumped into the wall at her back. She had to stop arguing with him. It was like arguing with the devil, and she knew no one ever won an argument with the devil. They had little time, anyway. She'd have to chance detonating the bomb. Aiming the laser at his head, she said, 'I think you're full of shit.'

She started to pull the trigger.

At that exact instant, Gary leapt toward Bill.

In a moment too short to properly grasp, Bill sprang

from behind the warhead and intercepted Gary. He wrenched Gary's arms behind Gary's back and thrust Gary before him, using Gary as a shield. Lauren quickly placed herself between them and the bomb. The timer ticked at her back. Gary struggled unsuccessfully to free himself. He was like a wooden puppet thrashing at the end of steel strings.

'What should I do?' she pleaded.

'Shoot,' Gary gasped. 'He'll get both of us.'

'A brave warrior,' Bill observed.

'I can't,' she cried.

'Do it!' Gary ordered.

Lauren shook her head.

'It's a stalemate,' Bill said. 'I wouldn't be surprised if we're still here when the third expedition arrives. What a welcome we could give them - much more thorough than the one Ivan gave us.' Bill smiled once more. 'I'm glad you two decided to visit me here today. I was hoping you would. Human curiosity and compassion are such remarkable characteristics. What next, Lori? Should I twist Gary's arm until he...'

Suddenly Bill let out the scream of a man who had been dashed with boiling water. He retreated like an injured insect, Gary still caught in his claws. 'No closer!' he swore. 'Stop! I'll snap his neck.'

Lauren looked down in amazement at her crucifix. She had remembered it only a moment ago, and had held it out toward Bill. It seemed such a little thing to get all excited about - not that she was complaining. Unfortunately, Bill wasn't going to stay put for Christian magic. He began to twist Gary's head back, way back.

'Stop it!' she shouted. She lowered the crucifix.

Bill nodded. 'That's better, much better. What now, Lori? Do you wish to negotiate? I will bargain with you.'

'Bargain, then,' Lauren said. They stood at the edge of the pool of boiling mud. A three-foot layer of thick red fog clung to the ground. It would be very easy, Lauren realized, to take a wrong step, and end up in the pool.

'My offer is simple,' Bill said. 'Tell me what Jim told you about the rings, and I will let Gary go.'

'Fine/ Lauren said. 'Release him and I'll tell you.'

'First you will put down the laser and the cross,' Bill said.

'Sure,' Lauren said. 'Then you'll get us both.'

'I promise I won't.'

'You expect me to believe you?' Lauren asked.

'You have no choice.' Bill twisted Gary's head. Gary shrieked.

'Enough!' Lauren said.

Bill paused. 'Do you find my terms agreeable?'

'This laser works. Kill him and I won't hesitate to shoot.'

'Then you'll go home, right?' Bill asked. 'Fool! When did you learn to fly the Hawk? Come, I'm a sportsman. We'll complete our parts of the bargain simultaneously. Is that reasonable?'

Lauren took several steps backward, wanting to increase her distance from Bill. His speed was obviously great, but she figured she should still have the time to retrieve the laser and cross once he freed Gary and before he could get to her. She eased the laser's strap over her helmet.

'It's reasonable,' she said.

'You agree to my terms?' Bill asked.

'Don't!' Gary called.

'I agree,' Lauren said. She finished with the strap and stood ready to drop the gun and cross at her feet. 'Now?'

'As promised,' Bill said. The conditions of the bargain were met. Lauren set down the laser and crucifix at the same moment Bill tossed Gary aside. Bill was a bit rough with him. Gary hit the wall with a groan and fell to the floor.

He sat up immediately but appeared dazed. Because Bill stood between them, Gary would have to circle the entire chamber to come to her aid. She was alone with the monster.

'Now, Lori,' Bill said. 'You will tell me about the ring. How did Jim recognize it?'

Lauren had expected him to charge. It had been her plan to immediately reach for the laser and crucifix. He made no threatening move, however. He simply stared at her, and once more she felt herself drawn to his eyes. It seemed the evils that had been committed were somehow removed and separate from those eyes.

'Jim died before he could tell me the full story of the other ring,' Bill continued. 'But you can tell me now, Lori.'

His eyes seemed to swell. When she tried to look away, she saw them still. They seemed to fill the chamber. They were like dark wells, from which she could drink if she was thirsty. And she was so thirsty. 'He found it,' she whispered.

'Where?'

'Under a mountain. In the Himalayas.'

'What did he do with it, Lori?'

His pronunciation of her nickname made her quiver with a rush of raw sensuality. The skin at the top of her thighs tingled. It made no sense, nothing did, but she suddenly had a terrible itch in her crotch that she just had to scratch -that someone had to scratch.

'Who did he give the ring to?' he asked.

His words were like a caress, rough but direct, straight to the point. It was embarrassing what was happening to her, she thought. Yet she didn't think enough. She continued to watch Bill, not moving.

She sighed. 'He gave it away.'

Bill pulled his generous lips over his white teeth, which

were much bigger than she remembered, much sharper. A helpless shudder went through her entire body and she welcomed it.

Love me, Lori.

'Tell me who he gave it to,' he asked.

She hesitated. 'Why?'

'Because it pleases me to know.' He licked his lips with his fat tongue, and she could imagine him - very vividly - doing other things with that tongue. 'Please me, Lori. Tell me who he gave it to.'

She coughed. 'I don't remember.' She wasn't lying. Her mind had gone blank, and she wanted it that way. She wanted to be one big organ, throbbing with sensation.

'Did he give the ring to her?' Bill asked.

'To who?'

He took a step closer. 'To her?'

Her voice slurred. 'Who's her?'

He spoke with demanding force. 'Did he give it to your sister?'

'Jenny?' The name startled her, and it caused Bill to blink, to move his eyes, in such a way that she could see beyond them. His spell broke, and she was suddenly furious with herself. She was staring into his eyes again!

Lauren realized her danger. But she let the realization show in her face. Bill pounced even as she reached for the crucifix. But she seized it before he could get to her.

'Stop!' she commanded, holding up the cross in front of her. Bill halted ten feet away, and with her free hand she felt on the ground for the laser. It was difficult to find in the fog. 'In the name of God you stay where you are!' she said.

Now I've got him.

Then Bill smiled.

'Come on, Lori,' he said. 'You're getting a bit melodramatic, aren't you? I suppose now you're going to try to

cast out the demon in me in the holy name of Jesus Christ.' His smile disappeared and his tone hardened. 'It doesn't work that way. You were tricked, bitch, even as you thought you were tricking me. This has all been a ritual, not a test of reflexes.' He pointed at the wall where the bony hand clasped the silver ring. 'You're like your shadow, like the one who came before you. You make bargains that you have no intention of keeping. In this place, that's always a mistake. You always lose!'



With his last words, he pounced.

Lauren found the laser and grabbed hold of its barrel. Before she could pick it up and take aim, however, an inhuman blow struck her left side and splintered her ribs. Yet this time the low Martian gravity favored her, in exactly the same way it had betrayed her when she had fought Ivan. Rather than simply knocking her over, Bill's blow sent her somersaulting through a complete full roll. By blind chance, she came to rest upright on her knees, with the laser still in her hands.

Bill bore down on her once more. Lauren's head was spinning. Taking uncoordinated aim, she fired her weapon.

She missed. The bolt of energy exploded against the near wall, sending rocks hurtling through the red fog. One large rock hit her in the right side and knocked her over. The laser bounced on the ground beside her and she rolled over in a sheet of fog. She didn't have a chance to get off another shot before Bill was on top of her once more. But he was not standing on steady ground. To avoid her first shot, he'd had to jump to the side, and place himself precariously close to the pool of lava. But even as she watched, he regained his balance and stood gloating down at her.

'For a moment, Princess,' he said. 'But your moment has passed.'

He moved to fall on her.

Lauren reacted instinctively. She planted both her hands on the floor and thrust her lower body into the air. Both her feet landed in the center of Bill's chest just as he stooped to grab her. His momentum, however, was incredible and her legs buckled at the knees under the pressure. Yet this served to bring the full power of her hamstrings into use. With the last bit of her strength, she shoved him toward the boiling mud. For the second time he balanced on the edge of the pit. But the fates were kind, or else slippery, and he toppled backward into the lava. The fires immediately began their cruel work.

'No!' His scream rattled the chamber, and cursed her soul. Lauren watched in mute terror as he thrashed in a torture nothing could deserve. The lava fizzled through his pressure suit and melted through his flesh. Then there was a loud explosion, as his oxygen tanks ruptured and tore a chunk out of his back. A film of blood sprayed over the mud and quickly vaporized, and vanished in the red fog. Sinking deeper and deeper into the lava, he cried for help.

'Lori!'

Die. Die!

Before the pit sealed its prey, Lauren was given a last clear glimpse of his face, a face racked with agony, disintegrating under a flood of liquid fire, but a face that belonged once more to the real Bill. In the end, the possession had left her commander to suffer alone. It was a coward. Lauren turned away in anguish.

I want the risks to be mine alone.'

## TWENTY-EIGHT

They were lost somewhere between the island and the canal. A thick haze, of mysterious origin, had arisen over the black waters. A half-dozen flares had served only to turn the night into a brilliant cloud. For all they knew, they were paddling their boat in circles.

Gary had gotten up shortly after Bill died. He had never lost consciousness, but it had taken him several minutes until his head cleared enough for him to function intelligently. Together they had loosened the ring and fled the pit. Unfortunately, her tangle with Bill had left her seriously injured. They managed to reach the boat and set off from the island, but she couldn't paddle. She tried and almost fainted from the pain. She figured that at least three ribs were broken. She worried that one had punctured her lung. Her mouth was

full of blood. Plus her dehydration had caused her tongue to swell. Talking was difficult. Still, she counted herself lucky. She was alive, and in the pocket of her pressure suit was the ring. She already had visions of giving it to Jennifer when she returned home.

Jessica was still a question mark. While fleeing the pit, they had finally recognized a major clue as to her possible whereabouts. Hummingbird was not parked on top of the hill's plateau, which should have been Bill's logical landing spot. That meant Jessica had probably split in the craft

before they had arrived. She had probably gone back to the Hawk. But had she fled the pit in fear? Or had she been sent by Bill on an errand of death?

'How much time have we spent?' Lauren asked as they continued to flounder, lost between the island and the canal.

'Too much,' he said.

'How much time do we have?'

Gary consulted his watch. 'One hour and forty-three minutes.'

'Do we have enough time?'

'If we can find the canal in the next few minutes, I would say, yes. Barely. It will still be a mile to the cave.'

'We're not safe here?' Of course, she had no idea where here was.

'No way.'

"The bomb didn't look that big,' she said.

'Size is no indication of power. I didn't recognize the warhead, but it resembled the bombs the Stealth fighter carried. Those mothers were small, but they packed ten megatons. If we're caught here, we're as good as dead.'

'What exactly will happen when it goes off?'

'The entire island might rupture,' Gary said with pleasure. 'The fireball will expand and probably fill the cavern. But the energy will probably have trouble dissipating, unless this place is bigger than I think it is, or there are other canals beside the one we know of. A wave of fire will rush up that canal in either case, and we sure as hell better not be in its way.'

'How will the bomb affect the volcanic fissures?'

'Who can say? It might end up being a fuse for a bigger firecracker.'

'Sounds like quite a show,' she said, still wishing he had left the warhead sealed in the Hawk's basement. 'It's not

fair that you have to do all the paddling. You must be tired.'

'You more than paid your dues, Doc, when you shoved that monster in the cooker.'

She sighed. 'I know Bill was lost before we went down there, but it was hard to see him die that way.'

'He was dead already.'

'I suppose.'

'Do you believe in vampires now?' Gary asked.

She smiled weakly. 'I believe in magic rings.'

A few minutes later the front of the boat hit a smooth stone wall. 'Now where's the tunnel?' Gary asked the rock wall. 'Give me another flare, Lori.'

They shot it off and created another short-lived white cloud that didn't let them see more than ten feet in either direction.

'Well,' Lauren said. 'We can either go right or left. Maybe we should flip a coin.'

Gary glanced back the way they had come. 'When I've paddled on the right side, I've had my right hand lower down, in the stronger position. I've done the opposite on the left side. My left arm's a lot stronger than my right. I've probably pulled us to the left. I say we go to the right, and wish on that magic ring that right is right.'

'Sounds logical,' she said.

Luck was with them. Less than five minutes later they came to the canal. They had to assume it was the same canal as before. Seemingly tireless, Gary plowed the boat forward. Lauren encouraged him as best she could, what with the pain she was having. Her fantasies altered between a tall glass of lemonade and a fat shot of morphine.

An hour and ten minutes after starting up the canal, they floated at the end of the two-hundred-foot-long rope ladder. Far above, the searchlight they had set in place shone like a midnight star - a star light-years away. Who

was she fooling? First she would have to make the long climb to the cave. Then she would have to walk the miles back to the Hawk. She could hardly breathe, sitting perfectly still. She was never going to make it. Detonation was in twenty minutes.

'You first,' Gary said.

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. My ribs are a mess. You go ahead.'

He shoved the ladder in her face. 'Let's have some spirit, Doc'

'We don't have much time.'

'We only have to get around the bend in the cave. Then we'll be safe from the blast. Here - take the ladder and move your ass.'

Lauren gripped the second rung on the ladder and tried to pull herself upright. Immediately her vision blurred as burning knives stabbed through her side. It was not fair. She was so close!

'I can't do it!' she cried. 'The pain is too much.'

Gary squeezed her hand on the rung. He looked at her intently. 'Is that what I'm going to have to tell your sister and Terry? That you quit in the home stretch? Jesus, Doc, you just beat a Martian one on one. What the hell do you want? Nothing should be able to stop you.'

His last command struck her as so ludicrous that she began to laugh, before her broken ribs complained again. He helped her to her feet.

She grimaced. 'Just don't go shaking the rope.'

Gary nodded. 'I'll wait until you reach the top before getting on the ladder.'

'Do we have time?'

'We have time.' He took the laser and attached it to a hook on one of the pulleys they had originally used to lower the boat. He hoisted the weapon upward. 'The laser will be

there when you reach the cave, but not before. If she's near, and she smiles at you with her teeth, blow her head off.'

Lauren didn't argue with him. Gary swatted her lightly on the butt and she began to climb.

Pain. All she knew was pain. Mars not only had vampires; it had devils with red-hot pitchforks. They poked her left side every time she raised an arm, either arm. She existed in a universe where death would have been a pleasure. She tried not to breathe. She tried to think of green trees, blue skies, and blue lakes. She mastered each rung individually, playing every mind game she knew to block out her body. Finally she pulled herself over the edge of the cliff and into the cave. There she lay panting on the ground, swallowing another mouthful of blood.

'No sweat,' she told Gary.

He started up the ladder. Lauren rolled over and unhooked the laser from the pulley. She slipped the strap over her head. Gary was a distant flickering white dot. 'No sign of Jessica,' she said in her radio. 'How much time to Armageddon?'

'Fifteen minutes, twenty seconds. All the time in the world.'

'You're sure?'

'Yeah. We've nothing to worry about. This bastard planet...'

Gary didn't finish. Perhaps Mars had finally taken offense to his repeated swearing. Perhaps it was all just rotten coincidence. Olympus Mons shook its fist again.

The quake threw Lauren against the wall. She heard a surprised cry in her helmet, and then a dangerous silence. She sat up quickly, even before the shaking stopped, and crept to the edge.

'Gary?' She couldn't see his helmet light. 'Gary?'



Nothing to worry about.

'Gary!'

She heard a faint moan.

'Are you there, Gary? Please answer me if you can.'

'Still making house calls, Doc?'

'Gary! Where are you? I can't see your light.'

'I'm lying flat on my back on the boat. I fell. Was there another quake?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, no,' he muttered.

Tidal wave!

She raised the reception on her vocals. There it was - the far-off roar of a mountain of water crashing from the bowels of the world.

'You've got to get up!' she cried. 'A wave's coming. Get on the ladder.'

'My arm's broken. I think the bone's gone through the skin. I know what you mean about pain, Doc'

'I'll come down and get you. Hold on.'

'No! That would be foolish. Shine the searchlight on me. I'll find the ladder.'

Lauren caught him in the beam. He rolled from his back onto his belly and crawled like a horse with polio. The thunder of the tsunami grew. 'Do hurry,' she whispered.

As Gary straightened and took hold of the ladder, she saw the gross disfigurement of his left arm. Below the elbow, it twisted away from his body at a thirty-degree angle, and hung useless. Yet he begun to climb nevertheless, in the way a small bug tries to climb a tall wall moments after being wounded by an old shoe. His progress was miserably slow at best.

'Is there anything I can do?' she asked a minute later, when he stopped on a rung and showed no sign of going on. The fury of the tidal wave was almost on them.

'Tell me I'm the most handsome astronaut in the solar system.'

'There's none like you, on any of the planets,' she said.

'Tell me you would have married me if I'd had a steady job.'

'I would marry you. I love you. Please hurry, Gary!'

'Yeah, I'm climbing to the top, babe.' He coughed. 'To the top.'

He moved up another couple of rungs, but then was forced to rest again. The wave was too fast for a cripple. Lauren watched as the water began to recede up the canal. Foam swelled in the black chasm.

'It's coming!' she cried.

'I know,' Gary said in resignation. He stood unmoving on the ladder. 'Get away from the edge, Lori.'

'I'm not leaving you!'

'The water could reach as high as you. Please move back. Under my bed, in a blue binder, I have extensive notes on the Hawk's controls. Read them carefully. You're going home, Lori.'

Within the narrow area of visibility created by the searchlight anchored at the edge of the cliff, a white-maned monster swelled. The ground beneath Lauren's feet shook and instinctively she found herself turning and fleeing up the cave.

'Gary!' she screamed.

'I'm thinking of you, Lori,' he said.

Lauren was two dozen strides into the cave when a thick hand of compressed air slapped her on the back and knocked her to the floor. An invisible hurricane of noise and wind and rain swept around her.

Then there was a deadly hush. The wave had passed.

'Gary?' she said. 'Gary?'

There was no answer. Of course there was no answer.

Lauren stumbled back toward the edge and began to weep, the tears draining the last few drops of moisture from her parched system, washing over a hard lump inside that she knew would never dissolve, not even if she cried to the end of time. She reached the edge and found the searchlight shattered. All was dark. All was silent. She could see nothing. There was nothing. Gary was dead.

'The most handsome astronaut in the whole solar system,' she said, and sniffed. 'But I wish you had been a librarian.'

Alone. Forever alone. Or so she thought.

Mars had not finished with her yet.

There were footsteps behind her, loud footsteps. Lauren whirled and reached for the laser. She could see nothing, but she heard a voice, another ghost in the never-ending nightmare.

'Lauren,' it said.

## TWENTY-NINE

'Jessie?' Lauren whispered. The outline of someone or something moved toward her. It was only an outline. The voice that had spoken her name sounded devoid of life. Lauren aimed the laser. 'Tell me if that's you. Jessie?'

The shadow paused. 'It's me, Lauren.'

It was Jessica. Lauren felt no relief. Jessica sounded like a zombie. Lauren braced herself against the wall, the long black drop to the canal only a foot to her left. Lauren had come down into the dark to save Jessica, but she swore if Jessica so much as winked at her funny she would blow her in two.

Eight minutes to detonation.

Lauren knew she was dead. But there were worse things - such as welcoming the third expedition.

'Jessie,' Lauren said. 'I want you to stay where you are. You are not to come any closer.'

'Has something happened, Lauren?'

Jessica's voice remained flat and monotone, but now Lauren hesitated. Jessica had been incoherent following Jim's death. Maybe she was merely in shock now, induced by only God knew what had happened to her in the pit. Jessica took a step closer.

'Don't move!' Lauren ordered. 'Stay where you are.'

Jessica halted. 'Is that a gun?'

'Yes.'

"They don't work.'

'This one does.'

Jessica considered the answer for ages. 'I want to talk to you.'

'We can talk,' Lauren said. 'I'd like to talk. What have you been doing since I saw you last?'

'I was with Bill. You know. Have you seen Bill?'

'No.'

'But I left him...' Jessica didn't finish.

'Why did you leave? Did you take Hummingbird?'

'I wanted to be with you, Lauren. You and Gary. Where is Gary?'

'He's dead.'

'Oh,' Jessica said, as if she had just been told who had won the 1992 World Series. She stepped toward Lauren once more.

'Stay!' Lauren commanded. Jessica ignored her. She walked to the edge of the cliff, on the opposite side of the cave from Lauren, to where the tips of her boots poked out over the canal. She looked in the direction of the invisible island.

'Do you know where Bill is?' Jessica asked. 'I have to talk to him.'

'I don't know where he is.'

Jessica stiffened. She appeared to come out of her trance. 'How come you didn't bring him back with you?'

Lauren had no answer. Jessica took a large step closer.

'Where is he?' Jessica demanded.

'Stay where you are!'

'What have you done with him?'

'Stay,' Lauren said. She had to see Jessica's eyes, without actually looking into them. Their eyes were always weird.

But Jessica had her helmet light off, which was not an encouraging sign.

How could she possibly see in the dark? She must be one of them.

'Did you kill him?' Jessica asked bitterly.

'Listen to me, Jessie. Things have changed. Gary's dead. Jim's dead. Do you understand me? Please tell me that you do. Bill's changed.'

Lauren stopped. Jessica was smiling now, back on cloud nine. Her mouth was open and Lauren could see her teeth. They looked bigger, Lauren was pretty sure they did.

Jessica sighed with pleasure. 'He's changed, yes. He's been sweet to me, like old times. He came to me last night, while I was sleeping. I invited him into me.'

Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will! Bill must have been in their room last night. But that was impossible. Lauren knew she hadn't fallen asleep, even for a minute. Then she remembered that Jessica had risen briefly in the night to use the restroom. Bill must have got her then.

'What did he do to you?' Lauren asked. She was a fucking astronaut; she didn't need to hear shit like this. God, she felt like throwing up. Jessica smiled and touched her suit near the neck.



'A little pinch and then, sweet,' Jessica said. 'He said it would be warm and sweet.' She nodded. 'My Mom told me to save it for one man, and I did. I saved it for Bill.'

Lauren shifted her helmet - and the light on top of it -and strained to get a better picture of Jessica. Her old friend winced as the light crossed her face, and moved aside. But before she did, Lauren thought she saw a messy red mark on Jessica's throat.

/ don't need this shit, I really don't.

'What did he do to you?' Lauren whispered.

'He kissed me. He said I was his bride. He kissed me till I was bleeding and I liked it. I loved it, Lauren. I loved him sucking on me. I loved it dripping down my neck and over my...'

'Shut up!' Lauren cried.

Jessica fell silent, and went rigid again, except for her face, where there now crawled a spirit of pure loathing. Her lips pulled back over her teeth and stayed there as if they were pinned with needles.

Lauren sobbed. 'Oh, God, he drank your blood. Shit. Shit!'

'He never hurt me!' Jessica shrieked. 'He never hurt nobody! You think he killed Jim, but that's a lie! A devil's lie! Of course he came and sucked me. I'm his woman!'

Lauren roused herself and her weapon. Jessica was moving closer again. Ten feet. Eight feet. 'Stop,' Lauren snapped.

'You are a bitch! I saw you sleeping with Gary. I heard you plotting to kill my man.'

'One more step and I'll shoot,' Lauren said. 'I swear it.'

Jessica reached out her arms, reaching for her. 'Where's Bill?'

Lauren breathed. 'No closer, Jessie.'

'Where is he, Lauren?' Five feet.

Lauren shook her head. 'No.'

'Where is he, bitch?' Four feet.

'I don't know!'

Jessica was about to touch the tip of the laser. 'You murdered him!'

'Don't make me,' Lauren pleaded, pressing her back against the damp wall.

'Murdering harlot!'

'No, Jessie!'

Jessica lunged. Lauren pulled the trigger. The fire came,

a cracking bolt of red thunder. It went through Jessica's body like a knife going through soft butter. Jessica was instantly sliced in two. Lumps of steaming flesh splattered the walls of the cave. Jessica's two main sections teetered at the edge of the cliff for a moment, as if held together by invisible threads, or a will that refused to die. Then the pieces toppled and were gone. Far away there came two distinct splashes. Lauren briefly glanced at the cindered intestines that lay scattered at her feet. She also noticed, without much interest, that the laser had torn away a chunk of the wall. Splintered fragments of stone mixed in with the gore, smoking faintly. Still, Lauren felt no relief. She didn't even feel sick anymore. She just felt cold and empty.

Jessie. My friend Jessie.

Four minutes to detonation.

Lauren fell to her knees and began to pray.

'I love you, Jenny. I'm sorry I won't be coming home. I'm sorry I won't be there to watch you grow up. Things just didn't work out for me this time. Things just went bad, real bad. I should never have left you. Jenny, promise me that you will never forget...'

Lauren sprang to her feet.

Quickly she backed away from the edge.

A gloved hand had suddenly appeared at the top of the rope ladder.

The dead seemed so alive.

Her terror was complete. It led beyond reason, into the easy to find but difficult to leave sanctuary called madness. She watched without the strength or the will to use the laser's last charge as a second gloved hand appeared.

This one was covered with blood.

THIRTY

There should have been nothing to comprehend. The thing that was emerging was coming out of a place where neither the living or the dead could exist. The hands were followed by a helmeted head. Lauren did not move. A torso came next, followed by legs and feet. The thing stood in the dark, a black creature devoid of characteristics. It was Ivan. No, it was Bill. Jessica. It was all of them. They were all one, and it didn't matter that the books had different names for them. Ghouls and succubi and werewolves - they were always hungry and thirsty.

Lauren finally broke from her paralysis and dropped to one knee, steadying the laser on the middle of her thigh. She aimed for the heart and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. She tried again. Nothing. Then she realized: she was holding the same laser she had used on Ivan. The president had said there were only three shots to a clip. They had never recharged the gun, and by chance, Jim had chosen this particular laser to be their ace in the hole. What a fuckup.

Lauren turned and ran, or at least she tried to run. The floor was wet and slippery, and her knee was shot. She slipped and fell. The thing behind her took a step toward her. It was the oldest of all nightmares - the monster at her

back and she the victim unable to run away. Cringing into a shivering ball, finally giving up, she knew that if she pinched herself she wouldn't wake up on Earth. The creature took another step toward her.

It didn't attack her, however, and it made Lauren wonder. She raised her head and glanced over her shoulder. Still the dripping figure made no hostile move. It was injured. Its left arm was horribly twisted.

'Gary?' Lauren whispered.

He groaned, then fell to the floor.

'Gary!' she cried.

She jumped up and knelt to cradle his head in her arms. He grimaced as he tried to smile, but he had not lost his sense of humor. 'Surf's up, Doc,' he mumbled.

'Gary, you're supposed to be dead. But you're alive!'

'If only I'd had my board.'

In the light of her helmet, she could see that his thermal underwear beneath his pressure suit was soaked red. 'Your poor arm - I've got to stop the bleeding.'

'No,' he said weakly. He tried to rise. 'The time?'

She had forgotten about the bomb. 'We have three minutes. Can you travel?'

He nodded. 'We've got to get around the bend in the cave.'

Leaning on each other for support, they limped away from the edge of the cliff. They had gone less than two hundred yards when they discovered Hummingbird, parked with its nose pointed toward the canal. Moaning in pain, Gary fell in the passenger's seat. Lauren jumped behind the controls.

Two minutes to detonation.

In order to turn Hummingbird around, she realized, they had to fly back out over the canal. Calling upon her hours of training in an abandoned parking lot outside of Houston,

Lauren activated the jets beneath the hovercraft and gripped the steering control that stuck like an oversized manual stickshift directly in front of her. The power to the jets was regulated by an ordinary foot pedal. Hummingbird bobbed off the ground and floated forward. Gary mumbled something that she didn't make out. Perhaps it had been a warning, for as soon as they floated past the edge of the cliff, Hummingbird began to sink, slowly at first, and then like a rock.

Lauren realized in an instant what had happened. Once they had left the ground behind, they had lost the added buoyancy of their trapped air cushion. As the black water rushed to meet them, she floored the foot pedal. It was well she did. For several seconds a powerful spray shot out all around them. Then they began to rocket toward the ceiling. Lauren quickly took her foot off the pedal and turned the craft around before they could begin to fall again. She applied medium power to the jets, and let Hummingbird settle in midair just beyond the end of the cave.

She checked their time.

Thirty seconds.

Yet their calculations were wrong. Even as she studied her watch, the bomb exploded. Searing light flashed from the direction of the cavern, so bright that it obliterated everything else. Lauren floored the pedal and Hummingbird leaped forward at high speed. One second into the tunnel, the shock wave hit, an almighty fist of blasted air. The tunnel shook violently. It was next to impossible to steer. Behind them a new wave rushed up the canal, a wave of fire, turning the black waters to shining steam. The steam shot around them on all sides, instantly raising the internal temperature of their pressure suits to that of an oven. But Lauren had gone through too much to let

Hummingbird smash into the walls. She rode the wave of fire, and they survived.

In the basement of the Hawk, on the same table where Lauren had cut out James Ranoth's heart, Gary Wheeler lay on his back. The bones of his fractured left arm protruded through his skin four inches above the back of the wrist. He was unconscious. Using a scalpel and a scissors, Lauren cut off the arm of his pressure suit and then his undershirt. A quick examination showed he had torn tendons and a severed median nerve. He needed surgery, she knew, a blood transfusion, and water. She could already see that his hand and arm would never be the same.

Lauren crossed to the part of her medical cabinet that had survived the rough landing. She selected hypodermics, narcotics, stitches, and a small bottle of glucose solution. She had only one of the latter, and she knew she would need ten of them to rehydrate him fully. She started an IV, and gave him a light anesthesia. She doubted he would wake during the operation; he was out cold. It was a miracle he was even alive, she thought. During their flight from the canal, while he phased in and out of consciousness, he had explained how he had tied himself to the rope ladder, and thus survived the tsunami. He also mentioned how a soft spongy sack hit him after the wave had passed. She hadn't told him it had been a piece of Jessica.

At present it was dark outside. The wind howled, blasting the exterior hull with snow. For an almost airless planet, Mars was sure delivering plenty of environmental abuse. Lauren sat on a stool beside the table, too weak to stand, and began to cut through Gary's arm with her scalpel. She prayed that he didn't die on the table.

Lauren awoke on the couch in the living area to moans of

pain. She checked the clock. Four hours had passed since she had put in Gary's last stitches. She tried to sit up but immediately doubled over in pain. She had forgotten her broken ribs. A pity they had not forgotten her. The dry heaves that followed did not help matters. She staggered down the ladder to the basement.

Gary rocked on the table in a nightmare. He had yanked out the IV attached to the now empty glucose bottle. His left arm was bandaged, locked in a brace. She touched his forehead. It was hot.

'Gary,' she said. 'Wake up. Can you hear me?'

His thrashing subsided. He opened his glazed eyes. 'I'm cold, Lori,' he whispered. 'My hand is so cold. I'm thirsty. Ahh!'

An intense spasm of pain gripped him. Lauren was at a loss. She had hoped he would awaken strong enough to pilot the Hawk into orbit. Apparently the loss of blood and the dehydration had weakened his system more than she had anticipated. Lauren took hold of his shoulders.

'Listen to me,' she said. 'You've got to get up. We've got to get back to the Nova. I can't help you here.'



The spasm continued. Veins bulged at his neck. It was as if his body was in one massive cramp. 'No!' he cried. 'The cold. Make it stop, Lori. Help me!'

She could not bear to see him suffering so. She prepared a shot of morphine and injected him in the vein on his right arm. Within a couple of minutes he began to relax, and soon he was asleep. Lauren removed his bandages and studied his injury. Her puzzlement deepened. The broken skin surrounding his incision was a dark green, almost black. He had a serious infection, yet he had shown not a trace of one a few hours ago. What germ could have multiplied so swiftly? She sniffed. His arm smelled as if it was rotting.

Lauren reinserted his IV and changed his type antibiotics. She doubled the dosage. Then she took a knife and made a slit in the skin at the site of the infection, allowing the pus that dribbled out to collect on a slide. She studied the sample under a microscope, but didn't recognize the cells. One thing she did recognize, however. The cells appeared dead, yet they were multiplying.

Lauren took a blood sample from Gary. Here she found no sign of the cells, even though she subjected the blood to a number of tests. She was somewhat reassured. The infection was spreading, it was true, but it was still contained.

Lauren took the pus and prepared a culture. She wouldn't have been surprised if Ivan's face had started to grow in the center of it. Then she lay down on the floor beside Gary. She would awaken when he did.

She heard cries in the dark, and she was standing and holding his hand before she knew she was awake. Gary writhed like a frothing animal with rabies.

'It's Lauren,' she said, squeezing his uninjured hand. 'Can you hear me?' She turned on the light.

He awoke, shivering, fear in his eyes. 'I'm freezing. I'm cold-like them.'

Lauren examined his left arm. The infection had moved into his hand; it was also creeping toward his elbow. The odor was worse. Indeed, he was beginning to smell like the pit where Bill had met his end.

'What are you feeling?' she asked. 'Tell me.'

He closed his eyes, struggling, apparently fighting an internal resistance. 'I feel cold and thirsty. I can't breathe. But I feel that if I drink ... if I drink.' He shook violently, his eyes popping open. 'No! I won't! Stop them, Lori! Stop them!'

Lauren grabbed him, struggling to keep him on the table. She glanced over at the arm of his pressure suit that she had cut away. It was then she noticed the small torn flap at the elbow. The damage had probably occurred when he fell off the ladder during the quake, before the tidal wave hit. When the wave rolled over him, though, the pressure must have been immense. Lauren wondered if perhaps a drop or two of the canal water had penetrated his suit at that moment and mixed with his blood. The idea was not totally farfetched. There were three layers to the suit. The outer layer was made of a hard - although flexible - plastic. It was that layer that had been breached. The middle layer was a tight weave of synthetic thread. It was possible the pressure had been able to force a tiny portion of water inside to the third layer - which was basically a flannel coat - even though the suit remained sufficiently intact to keep the air from escaping.

There seemed no other way to explain his bizarre infection. His symptoms were totally alien. The fingers of his left hand had begun to swell, the flesh turning the same dark green as her incision. Bill and Ivan had not displayed such signs, of course, but no medical text she knew of outlined all the phases human physiology went through before it metamorphosed into a walking corpse. For all she knew, both Bill and Ivan had turned a dozen weird colors. Gary continued to shake in her hands like a man possessed. Lauren put her head to his ear and spoke gently.

'Gary,' she said. 'Tell me, what's going through your head? I have to know before I can give you another shot.'

'I'm cold. I'm suffocating. Thirst.'

'What are you thirsty for?' she asked.

A sudden wild gleam entered his eyes. Lauren took an instinctive step backwards.

You know, Lori.

But the gleam vanished, and Gary rolled onto his side and began to mumble nonsense. Then another spasm of pain came and he screamed and screamed and wouldn't stop. Lauren gave him another shot of morphine. This time he took a long time to settle down. Finally, though, he relaxed, and began to doze.

Lauren checked on the culture and found a stinking dish of green fungus-like growth. She studied the sample under an electron microscope and a section of college biology came back to her. The cell structure of the infection was not totally foreign, after all. She'd seen it before, in school when they'd studied reptiles.

Reptiles?

Martians.

Lauren hurried back to Gary. The antibiotics were doing no good. The infection appeared to spread even as she watched. He had only one chance. She shook him awake.

'Gary! Wake up! I have to tell you something.'

He stirred uneasily in a dream-like daze. 'Decision. Live forever. Forever.' he began to weep miserably. 'No blood. Too much blood. Immortal children.'

Lauren shook him again. 'Gary!'

'My guardian can't save me.'

'You have to wake up!'

'Chan...' he whispered.

Then he was asleep. It was her decision to make alone. Another look at his arm and she made it quickly. She prepared another injection, and took up her scalpel and a small electric saw. She had no choice. She had to amputate his arm at the elbow.

Lauren sat by a porthole in the control room with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. It was night. She couldn't

sleep. Somehow she had lost the day. At least the blizzard had abated. Still, outside was a happening place. Gary's casual remark about the warhead acting as a fuse was proving correct. The summit of Olympus Mons glowed a dangerous red; a Martian candle lit in mourning for the loss of the black altar. But this was no candle to be easily blown out. It dripped hot wax in their direction, hot lava that was going to reach the Hawk soon. She watched as the fine fiery lines crept down from the caldera and asked herself what else could possibly go wrong.

She had studied the notebooks under Gary's bed. She would have to study them for a couple of years before she would know how to get the Hawk in the air.

'Friend,' she said. 'What are the odds that we'll get home?'

Of course, the computer was no longer on speaking terms with her. Yet it must have been listening. Across the control room, on a square blue screen, large red-lettered words suddenly formed.

[One hundred percent, Lori.]

Gary called her name. Lauren pulled her numb face off the cold window, blinking in the morning light. She'd fallen asleep watching the volcano. It was day. The plateau was full of steam. The approaching lava was vaporizing the snow. She hurried to Gary's side.

He was crying like a child, staring where his once strong left arm had been. Thankfully, in what was left of the arm, she saw no signs of infection.

'Where's my arm, Lori?' he asked pitifully.

'You had a serious infection. I had to amputate it.'

He winced. 'Why didn't you give me medicine?'

'The medicine wasn't working.'

'But where is it?' he asked. Clearly, he still didn't

comprehend the full meaning of his shortened bandage.

'It's gone. It was rotting. I had to cut it off.' She wanted more than anything in the world to be gentle, and yet she sounded cruel to her own ears. She lowered her head. There were no gentle amputations. 'I'm sorry, Gary.'

'You didn't tell me!' he cried. 'You didn't ask me!'

'You were unconscious. I did what I thought was best.'

'Get out of here! Go away! Just leave me alone!'

'I can't,' she said. 'We have to get out of here. We have to blast off. We need water, and the volcano's erupted. You have to get up to the control room'

'You're a monster!' he yelled. He was furious. He wanted to hurt her. He tried to sit up, but was too weak. 'Give me back my arm. I want my arm.'

'Gary. Please?'

He fainted. Lauren caught him as he slumped back. She took his pulse and found it thin and rapid. The green pus was gone and with it the fever, but he was nevertheless dying. If she didn't get liquid into his system soon, it was possible he wouldn't wake up again. She wasn't much better off. She couldn't swallow. Her head felt as if worms with teeth were chewing on the synapses in her brain. Her eyes were so shot with blood they scared her when she looked in the mirror.

Lauren reached down, pinched Gary's Achilles' tendon, and got no response. She debated giving him a stimulant, but feared the drug would cause him to have a heart attack. She tried to think of alternatives and her mind drew a blank. Almost a blank.

She wondered if it was time she started on her own diary.

A moonlit night. The trees shook in the harsh wind. Waves of white foam crashed on the glittery shore of the wide lake. She walked barefoot along the empty beach, wearing a long

simple white dress, with a scarlet sash tied at her waist and falling over her hip. Her hair was long, partially braided, and it touched her breast as she moved. She felt and heard nothing. She only saw. All was silent. Her feet moved over the ground but left no prints. She walked in the steps of destiny. She was home.

She came to a gathering of people huddling in a thick of trees. They carried burning torches - the flames protested the windy night. Without effort she moved closer; nothing obstructed her. She recognized the spot. She was at Terry's cabin. Only now the cabin was nothing but a pile of ash. Three tombstones stood in the center of the mess. The people standing near them were all familiar to her. There was Daniel, Mr Russo, Jean and Stephen Floyd. She had never met the latter two, but that did not seem to matter.

Jean Floyd, holding two white roses, separated from the group and stepped to the first tombstone on the left. The light of her torch shone on the name carved in the stone: terry hayes, 1970-2006.

Weeping, Jean Floyd deposited her first flower, then moved to the next tombstone. It read: Jennifer wagner, 1992-2005. Here she also set down a flower. But Jean gave the third grave only a hasty glance, before making the sign of the cross and backing away.

Stephen stepped forward next. He carried a Bible. At Terry's and Jennifer's graves he paused and recited a prayer. Lauren could not hear him directly, but she could see what he was saying. Yet he also avoided the third tombstone.

Next came Daniel. He laid aside his torch and went immediately to the third grave. There he pulled a silver ring from his pocket with one hand and began to dig in the soil with the other hand. All of a sudden, though, Mr Russo grabbed him from behind and stopped him. His face was filled with fury. He shoved Daniel aside, and holding forth

Ais torci, shouted curses at the third grave. Lauren couldn't understand exactly what he was saying. Daniel pleaded for him to stop, but Mr Russo turned and slapped the boy in the face. From beneath his coat Mr Russo removed a sealed wine bottle, which he raised in the air and then brought down on the cursed tombstone. The glass cracked. No wine spurted forth, however. It was blood. It dripped slowly over the front of the tombstone, almost covering the letters and numbers carved there, the name and dates Lauren had so far been unable to decipher.

Daniel continued to protest: Mr Russo went to strike him again. Lauren stepped forward to ward off the blow.

Then things got strange.

The torches died; it went pitch black. A huge hand blotted out the moon. Jean Floyd screamed, and with her Mr Russo, for something had reached from beneath the third grave, and was now dragging him into the deep. The others fought to free him, but the thing beneath the soil was too strong, its grip too tight. Soon Mr Russo vanished beneath the ground. Then a shrill laugh rent the darkness, and the letters and numbers on the third tombstone began to glow with a wicked red light.

LA UREN WA GNER, 1973-2006.

Lauren woke to a roar of sounds, her pulse pounding in her head, and the Hawk shaking from a series of miniature quakes. She groped to her knees and looked out of a porthole. It was night again; she had slept away the day. The edge of the plateau was on fire. Now lava poured from the mouth of the cave itself. Geysers of steam rocketed into the air. Far above, the caldera of Olympus Mons spewed forth a shower of fireworks. Incandescent globs of mud riddled the sky. If just one of those massive sparks hit the Hawk, she thought, the ship could explode. She climbed to



her feet and staggered down to the basement. She vaguely recalled having had a terrible nightmare.

Gary was unconscious. It was now or never, she decided. Turning to her medicine cabinet, she prepared a shot of methedrine and stuck it in his vein. His eyes, covered with a dark film, opened a minute later.

'Gary,' she said. 'Wake up. This place is on fire.'

He nodded faintly and closed his eyes. Lauren slapped him across the face. 'Gary!'

His eyes reopened and focused on her. 'Lori, I had a beautiful dream filled with flowers.'

'Olympus Mons is erupting. We have to get out of here.'

'Erupting,' he whispered, not understanding.

Lauren unwrapped his bandage. There were still no signs of infection. Gary looked where his arm was supposed to be. He just looked.

'I'm sorry,' she said again. 'If there had been some other way.'

He touched her trembling chin with his remaining hand. 'You did the right thing Doc. The cold is gone, and the nightmares. The beautiful dream started when the cold left. I wish I could remember it better so that I could tell you about it.'

'You don't hate me for what I did?' she asked.

Gary smiled peacefully, and went back to sleep. He was going to die, she knew, within the next couple of hours, unless she got him water. In despair she slumped beside the basement porthole and stared at the approaching river of fire. It would reach Jim's grave before it got to them. But perhaps the next expedition would know to bury Gary and herself beside Jim. Then they could have three tombstones on Mars, all in a row.

Tombstones.

Then Lauren remembered.

I can't reprimand him. I still have my bottle of 'eighty-nine French wine.

A bottle of wine! None of them had considered drinking from the Karamazov\ water supply for fear of contamination - especially after Ivan had turned out to be a fucking zombie. But Dmitri's wine - no one had known about the bottle except him. It was hidden, no doubt, but she could probably find it if she looked for it.

Lauren had her pressure suit on in ten minutes. Passing through the airlock, she climbed into Hummingbird. The craft's fuel tanks were low, but the Russian lander was not far. She slowly hovered out of the Hawk's garage and then shot across the plateau at sixty miles an hour, the steam whirling about her. Twice she flew directly over huge lumps of flaming mud that burned on the snowy land like barbecues on the plains of Antarctica.

Soon she was standing on the high platform that led into the Russian ship. The controls responded to her touch, but the airlock door opened only partially. The quakes had tilted the Karamazov slightly off balance, stressing the hull and putting unusual pressures on the doors. Lauren was barely able to squeeze inside. She cried out loud from the pain the squeeze caused the cracked ribs.

Lauren went to Ivan's and Dmitri's bedroom. She searched the desk but did not find the bottle. She crossed to the bunks, skirting the blood on the floor, and tore through the mattresses. No wine. With the touch of a button she was inside the bedroom locker. On the floor, beneath clothes, she found an old-fashioned chest. She dragged it into the center of the room. The sides were screwed shut. She hurried to the level below, to the laboratory, where she retrieved a knife. She had the chest screws out in a couple of minutes.

The bottle lay at the bottom of the chest, wrapped in blue

felt; a deep red wine, '89 - a very fine year indeed. It was full, and from the intact seal, it had obviously never been opened.

Lauren returned to the Hawk. Before she went inside, however, she visited Jim's grave. If she'd had the strength, and the time, she would have dug through the stones and gravel and returned his body to the ship. What fools they had been to fear that he might rise to haunt them. His death had been their only decisive warning. In the pit Jim must have been given the opportunity of decision - immortality or oblivion. He had chosen the latter, to let them know for certain what they were up against. Lauren hoped his end had come easily. Perhaps his heart hadn't betrayed him after all, but had spared him worse tortures.

Lauren draped the crucifix she had made over the cold rocks. Then she said the prayer she hadn't been able to say at his funeral. She believed there was a chance God heard it.

Lauren stood by Gary's side, waiting for the stimulant she had just administered to take effect. Finally he opened his eyes. She bent over him and uncorked the top of the bottle.

'How are you feeling?' she asked.

He smiled faintly, his eyes far away. 'I was walking in trees and flowers. I was in a garden. Do you see the flowers, Lori?'

'Yes. We're walking in the garden together.'

'The garden.' He closed his eyes and began to nod off again.

'No, Gary. Wake up. You have to drink.' She shook him. 'I've brought you something to drink.'

'Drink?' he whispered, interested. He opened his eyes and looked at the bottle in her hands. She helped him into a

sitting position so he wouldn't choke and held the top of the bottle to his lips. All alcoholic beverages were dehydrating to an extent, but in his present condition the water content of the wine would more than make up for the effect of the alcohol.

'Drink,' she said.

His expression brightened. Like a child speaking to his mother, he asked, 'It's good?' He opened his mouth to the wine.

Lauren smiled. 'Very good. Sip it slowly. There you go, that's good. Drink more, as much as you like. There's lots.'

He finished a quarter of the bottle in one gulp, and then, sighing with pleasure, drank more. When he was satisfied, Lauren took the bottle away and made him lie down and rest, giving his system a chance to absorb the liquid. A shudder rolled through his body,

which scared her. But then his breathing deepened and appeared to gain strength. A few minutes later she had him take another drink. The mists began to clear from his eyes.

'I don't know where you've been stowing your booze, Doc,' he said. 'But I wish you'd brought out the stuff earlier.'

Lauren laughed, and it was as if a great weight fell from her then. 'It's Dmitri's wine. He mentioned it in his diary. I just returned from the Karamazov.'

'Dmitri.' Gary smiled. 'Let that be a lesson to you, the next time you're thinking of pouring Scotch down the drain.'

Lauren laughed again, enjoying the sound of it. It had been so long since she had felt joy. Terry and Jennifer were alive in her mind once again. 'Are you strong enough to stand?' she asked.

He sat up. 'I don't know. It doesn't matter. Just help me to the control room. Then I can sit down again.' He pointed

to the bottle. 'Have you had anything to drink?'

Lauren was tempted, infinitely tempted. But the doctor in her was strong, even if the rest of her was falling apart. Gary was weaker than she, and also more vital to them regaining orbit. She knew his thirst would return shortly.

'I want you to finish the rest,' she said. 'It will take time to check all the systems and you'll need your strength.' Lauren hugged him. 'God, Gary. We're going home!' He kissed her cheek. 'I wish I could hug you back.' She pulled slightly away. 'I can't say how sorry I am.' He shook his head. 'What are you apologizing for? You saved my life. Hell, they'll probably give me a purple heart. Wounded in action in the war of the worlds.' He smiled

once more, although the corners of his mouth remained sad. Both their eyes strayed to the window. The river of lava was now only a few hours away. Gary continued, 'While I prepare the Hawk for lift-off, I want you to get rid of everything Martian on this ship. I mean absolutely everything. The only thing we're taking home from this place is a bunch of bad memories.' 'Amen,' she said.

Lauren did what Gary said, with one exception. She found the silver ring - forgotten in the urgency to attend to Gary's arm - in the living area beside the couch. She debated asking Gary's permission to bring it back to Earth. She finally decided against raising the issue, afraid he might say no.

NASA would never know.

Lauren slipped the ring in her pocket. She still planned to give it to Jennifer.

### THIRTY-ONE

The interplanetary drama was hours old. On Terry's TV screen, the Hawk drifted through a dangerously low orbit, apparently out of fuel, with no power to maneuver. The much larger and more cumbersome Nova, piloted by Mark Kawati, was dropping down to rendezvous. Mark had been unsuccessful at raising the Hawk on his radio. He now had visual contact, however. He estimated they could dock in five minutes.

Terry was alone in his apartment. He sat on the floor with the lights off, his knees hugged to his chest. It was the middle of the night. The TV screen was his only source of illumination, in many ways. When Tom Brenner had called earlier and awakened him with the news of the Hawk's liftoff from Mars, Terry had been tempted to race down to Mission Control. Sitting where he was, though, the view was just as good. Besides, he was running a fever. He'd been ill since he'd buried Jennifer, three days ago. Or had it been four?

'Good visual,' Mark Kawati said from two hundred million miles away - and twenty minutes ago. 'Time to contact, Friend?'

[Four-minutes, five seconds, Mark.]

'They look good, Houston,' Mark said. 'Their rotation vector is almost nil.'

Lauren had to be alive in that far-off silver ship, Terry told himself. Yet if she was, what would she think of him after she received the news of her sister? It was a selfish thought, Terry realized, but an honest one. Lauren would soon know about Jennifer. The suicide had been spread across the front page of every major newspaper in the country. Another tragedy in the Wagner family, the reporters said. But, of course, they'd had to add that Jennifer was seeing a psychiatrist. Terry understood Mark Kawati read the papers.

Even if Lauren didn't hold him to blame, Terry knew he was never going to forgive himself for having left Jennifer at the cabin, practically alone, wandering the nights with only the imaginary characters of her story for companionship. The Sastra, the children of the garden -how sad their tale had been, and how gruesome had been the section that dealt with Janier's death, and Kratine's curse. Then there had been Jennifer's final remarkable chapter, when Chaneen had called upon the unspeakable power to destroy an entire world. Terry was not sure whether Jennifer had thought of herself as Chaneen or as Janier, and now he could never be certain. Perhaps she had identified with neither character, but with King Rankar instead, who had sacrificed his life for the sake of his children. Perhaps Jennifer had thought she had to do the same in order for Lauren to return home.

Mark spoke to Houston. 'We will eclipse in eighteen minutes, but should dock well before then. No communications from the Hawk yet.'

Through the cameras mounted outside the Nova, the Hawk grew swiftly. Terry could almost see through the tiny rectangles of yellow light that represented the ship's portholes.

'She's coming up,' Mark said, his voice tense. 'They're braking, looking good.'

Suddenly tiny flares erupted on the sides of the Hawk. 'That's strange,' Mark muttered. 'They're firing their auxiliary rockets.' There was a pause. 'Friend! What is their velocity relative to us?'

[Forty miles an hour, Mark. Sixty-five miles an hour.]

'They're coming right toward me!' Mark cried. 'Friend, port side. Initiate burn on the D and E rockets.'

The Hawk seemed to swallow the TV screen.

'More power!' Mark yelled. 'They're going to...'

The screen turned to static. Then a frantic TV commentator at Mission Control broke in. Terry didn't listen to what he had to say. He was already on the phone to Mission Control, trying to get through. But the line was busy. He ripped the phone out of the wall, threw it to the floor, and kicked it across the room with his right foot. His big toe gave a loud crack and he realized he had probably broken it. What did it matter? What could anything matter now? It was obvious the two spaceships had collided.

Strapped in her seat, in the weightless control room of the Hawk, Lauren peered through the faceplate of her helmet at the ship's multidirectional viewing screens. Mars was below, the sun above. The Nova was approaching from behind.

'Wake up, Gary,' she said. 'She's almost here.'

The wine had helped Gary to his feet, but the rejuvenation had worn off. Gary had gone back to his dreams of flowered meadows drifting in and out of consciousness. He looked



at her with drowsy eyes, his dark hair floating straight out from his head within his helmet. 'What did you say?' he asked.

'The Nova's coming. What should we do?'

He roused himself and studied his monitors. Then he pushed a button with his right hand and pointed at a luminous dial with the stump that had been his left arm.

'I've saved a little fuel in our auxiliary thrusters to help straighten us out,' he said. 'Would you turn that dial ninety degrees counter-clockwise, Lori?'

She did so.

'Wait!' Gary yelled, coming fully awake.

Too late. The rockets began to fire.

'Not that one!' Gary shouted. 'I didn't mean that one.'

'What do I do?'

Gary tried to reach for a switch but forgot about his missing arm. It was only then Lauren remembered that he was left-handed.

'Lori, push that switch down,' he said. He cursed and tried to undo his belt, but with only one hand, and in his hurry, the task became hopelessly complicated. 'No! The other one,

yeah. No, wait!' He studied his instruments for a moment. Then he sighed, and spoke in a softer tone. 'It's too late, it's done. We'll have to wait and see what happens.' He glanced out the porthole. The Nova was looking awfully big, awfully quick.

'What's happening?' she cried.

'We just gave ourselves a boost in the wrong direction. Let's hope Mark's on his toes. God, it looks like we're going to collide. Close the portholes, Lori.'

She did as she was told. It only made matters worse, as far as she was concerned. The unseen threat was always more terrifying. 'Is there nothing we can do?' she asked.

Gary appeared remarkably cool. 'Brace yourself and pray we don't explode.'

The seconds crawled by. Five, ten - each as long as a half

dozen of her pounding heartbeats. Then a cruel jolt shook the ship and a high grinding noise ripped beneath their chairs, down in the basement. Their lights died. The blue emergency lamps flickered on a moment later and turned the Hawk's control room into a ghastly lagoon of confusion.

'Open the portholes,' Gary said calmly.

Lauren did as she was told. The Nova receded below them trailing twisted scraps of metal. One big piece of equipment was no longer attached to the mother ship.

'We tore off the antenna dish!' Lauren exclaimed.

'Let's count ourselves fortunate,' Gary said. 'Another few feet and both ships would have exploded.' He chuckled. 'I bet Mark's radio isn't working worth a damn now. Here we go again.'

'Do you think we damaged the Nova's hull?'

'It's hard to say for sure. Let's hope not.'

'It was my fault. I twisted the wrong dial. I was careless.'

'You're always blaming yourself, Lori,' Gary said, closing his eyes again. 'You must have a guilt complex. No, it was my fault. I'm just used to doing these things myself.' He smiled to himself. 'I guess old Bill couldn't complain about me now.' He yawned. 'But don't worry. We'll see Mark again, as soon as he can swing back around.'

Lauren was not sure how much time passed before Mark was able to maneuver into docking position again, for she spent most of that time asleep. She awoke only when the Nova's heavy clamps hinged onto the Hawk. Lauren's thirst and pain was almost washed away in the joy of that moment. She called to Gary, but he didn't respond. He snored loudly inside his helmet. She thought of Mark. With the Hawk secure, he would be leaving the Nova's control room and heading for the airlock that connected the two

ships. Lauren unbuckled her straps and floated down through the living area and into the basement. She removed her helmet.

Mark had already pumped atmosphere into their lock. Lauren just had to push the right button. The door swished open and a blast of fresh air hit her faceplate. She knew it was fresh even before she tore off her helmet, because it didn't have the stink of Mars in it.

Mark waited on the other side of the door in midair. He was grinning from head to toe.  
'Lauren!'

'Mark!'

He hugged her. Of course, he didn't know about her broken ribs, and when she cried out he moved back.

'What happened?' Mark asked. He studied her closer and his pleased expression turned to one of shock. 'You look sick. What's the matter with your side?'

She swallowed, bent over. 'It's a long story.'

He was distressed. 'Your lips are all cracked and bleeding.'

'I'm all right, Mark, really I am. It's Gary who needs our help.' Lauren straightened herself. He didn't know, how could he know? Mark glanced in the direction of the Hawk's control room.

'Is he injured?' he asked.

She hesitated. 'Yes.'

He was perceptive. 'Is he the only one? Has something happened to Jim?'

'Jim's dead.'

'Dead?' His tears were immediate. Jim had been like a father to Mark. 'How did he die?'

'I can't say right now. Jessie's dead. Bill's dead.' She added bitterly, 'So is the last Russian.'

Mark turned pale. 'All of them?'

'The planet killed them. It's a horrible place.' She took

his hands in hers. 'I'm thirsty, Mark. I need water. I need water like they needed blood.'

Mark carried Gary to Nova's sickbay. Gary didn't awake at first. It wasn't until she used the artery shunt on his remaining arm, and circulated his blood through the hibernaculum, and replenished his blood with liquids and electrolytes, that he regained consciousness. He was able to sit up and sip apple juice, but went back to sleep shortly afterwards.

Lauren's thirst got the better of her medical judgment. The first drink she took was too big and too quick, and she ended up vomiting. Afterwards, she contented herself with cautious sips. However, her thirst clung to her still. She wondered if it always would. The longing for water seemed burned into her brain.

When Gary was resting comfortably, she had Mark X-ray her side. The pictures were not pretty. She would need an operation when she got home.

Mark was anxious to know what had happened, but Lauren was too weak for a long speech. She encouraged him to talk instead, and his story followed lines familiar to hers.

While they were on Mars, he began to have trouble sleeping. He would awake more tired than when he went to bed, with vague memories of nightmares where lizard monsters chewed on his insides. When he lost contact with the Hawk, he had become frightened and wanted to leave. He'd been afraid he would end up like Carl. Yet, strangely enough, he began to identify with the dead Russian. He took to sleeping in the weightless hub, just floating around, with all the lights off. He even considered returning the Nova to the Gorbachev, to see if maybe Carl was alive, after all. He went so far as to start learning Russian from

Friend so that he could have a conversation with the eyeless corpse. He stopped eating, but was bothered by an awful thirst, even though he drank to the point of making himself ill. He was also cold, and set the thermostat at a hundred degrees. He thought of suicide, and spent endless hours just staring at Mars. Once, when Houston spoke to him, he told them that he believed mankind was a mistaken product of a primordial ooze. That they were always going to be alone, and that their only hope of salvation lay in complete extinction. Houston was worried about him.

Mark finished his story on an uncertain note. Lauren had the impression he was holding something back. However, she didn't press him. She figured there were some details she'd just as soon not know.

Gary woke and Lauren rested, and eventually they told Mark their tales. Mark believed every word they said. Given what he had gone through, it wasn't too surprising. The question of contamination arose. Neither Gary nor Lauren felt they were carriers of what had infected Ivan and Bill, but of course they had biased opinions. They just hoped the president didn't order them blown up in space. But they weren't worried about it. Gary remained firm about not bringing anything home from Mars. He ordered the soil samples from their first landing jettisoned into space. No one argued with him.

Thirty hours after the Hawk had lifted off from the Tharsis plateau, Mark fired the Nova's main engines and threw them out of the Martian orbit toward home, over a year away. The roar of the rockets had scarcely ceased when Lauren began to prepare the hibernaculums. Neither Gary nor herself was near recovery, but the lower metabolism induced by the Antabolene had been found, in previous experiments, to aid in the healing process. Lauren

was anxious to go under for psychological reasons as well; to wake millions of miles away with the soothing blue and white of Earth hanging in space instead of the hateful red of Mars.

Mark refused to get into his hibernaculum until Gary was well on his way to sleepyland. Together Lauren and Mark sat and chatted with him as his heartbeat slowly decreased. Gary was still set on the idea of surfing in Tahiti when they got home. His last words were of green waves and cocoa butter and surfboard wax. Sure, Gary, Lauren said. Whatever you want. He would never be able to paddle without his left arm.

'Are you going to go to sleep now?' Lauren asked Mark as she closed Gary's hibernaculum. 'Or am I going to have to call your Mommy and have her read you a bedtime story?'

'We can't call Earth,' Mark said abruptly. 'The antenna's destroyed. We can't get any news from them, not now.'

'I know,' she said, taken aback by his seriousness. Mark began to fidget. He looked out the porthole at Mars, always at Mars. 'What is it, Mark?'

He spoke to the floor. 'When I was alone here, the radio did work. I used to pass the time reading the papers at home. You know how it's nice to read when you're alone.' His tone was apologetic. 'They would beam them to me as they came off the press.'

'That's fine,' Lauren said, full of foreboding. 'I would have done the same. Has anything exciting happened lately?'

His voice cracked. 'Nothing exciting.'

Lauren leaned over and put her hand on his shoulder. 'Tell me. It can't be that bad.'

His voice was full of pain. 'Once, one day, there was a picture of your sister on the front page of one of the

newspapers. I can't remember what paper it was. But I knew it was her before I read the caption. It was that pretty picture you showed me once.'

Lauren said nothing.

'There was an accident,' Mark whispered.

'What kind of accident?'

'There was a fire. Someplace - a cabin in Wyoming. Your sister died in that fire, Lauren.'

Lauren sat back in her seat. She took a breath. She held it. Then she let it go and it came out of her body just like it always did. Only this time a part of her went out with the breath, into the air, and didn't come back. It was just gone.

'I see,' she said. 'Do you know when this happened?'

'The day after I lost contact with you guys. It was probably the day Jim died.' Mark broke down and cried. 'I wanted to tell you at first, but I couldn't. I just couldn't.'

'It was fine to wait,' Lauren said, her voice even, as even as a flat frozen lake. The universe was perverted; it spared her nothing. It threw her down in cold waters and held her head underneath. It never let her up. That was all right, though, even if it wasn't fair.



It was just fine. The water would freeze and she would stay underneath where there was nothing. She wanted to feel nothing, to be nothing. 'Was anyone else hurt in the fire?' she asked. 'Was Terry hurt?'

'No.'

Terry had always been amazed at how Jennifer could wave her hands slowly through fire, and never get burned. 'I'm glad,' she said.

Tears ran down Mark's face, poor sensitive Mark, who blushed at Gary's dirty jokes and who had almost gone insane just looking at Mars. It was a good thing he hadn't landed on the planet. It would have done bad things to him.

'She was a beautiful child,' he said. 'I remember her from

when your boyfriend took our picture. I remember her smile.'

'She had a nice smile,' Lauren agreed.

Mark looked up. 'Are you all right?'

Lauren closed her eyes. It was dark. That was fine, too. The cold and the dark went together. Mars had taught her that. 'I think I'll be all right,' she said softly. 'I think I'll miss her, though. I really think I will.'

Mark had been in his hibernaculum for two hours. Lauren was alone, as she had been on Mars when she had thought she was going to lose Gary. But even then she'd had her

daydreams, of all the wonderful things she was going to do with Jennifer when she got home, the places they would go, the talks they would have.

The Nova was quiet now, and peaceful. Most of the lights were off. Lauren sat by a porthole with the stars. Astronomy had never been a big interest of hers, not as it was with many astronauts. She knew little of the constellations. But Jennifer had known all the Greek and Roman myths, all the stories about the heavenly gods. She even used to wish on falling stars. But what wishes she made, Lauren never knew, for Jennifer said they had to be kept secret to become magical. Lauren hoped some of Jennifer's wishes had come true before she died.

A tear fell from Lauren's cheek and landed on her shirt. Jennifer had killed herself. Mark hadn't told her that, But the papers she had called up from Friend's memory - why, to them it was big news. They had all kinds of theories, too, as to why.

Why, God? Or is it, why not?

The stars were beautiful, Lauren thought. She promised herself to pay more attention to them in the future. She also promised herself to read the story Jennifer had been

working on. Terry had told her about it before their communications had been interrupted.

The monster gave me two alternatives: die or be worse than dead.

But was there a third? Was there a reason, for anything?

Lauren took the silver ring and for the first time placed it on her finger. She needed love. She needed Terry. He would be blaming himself for what had happened. If she could get a word to him, one word, it would do so much for him, and her.

Lauren stood and went to Jim's personal locker. Taking a pen and a piece of paper, she began a letter:

Dear Terry,

I need to talk to you, but you're far away and the radio's broken. I thought if I wrote this letter, though, you would know how I felt. My thoughts would cross space, and you would hear me in that silent place inside where you listen for inspiration for your stories. I want to inspire you. I want to tell you beautiful things. But it's hard right now.

I know Jenny's dead. I know both of us feel like dying. But we can't do that. Mars taught me that much. You see, Terry, there are things on Mars...

After Lauren had finished her letter, she took an envelope from Jim's locker - only Jim would have thought he could mail a letter from another planet - and carefully sealed her note inside. She wrote on the outside, simply: Terry.

Then Lauren returned to the porthole and looked at the stars for a long time.

## THIRTY-TWO

Lauren lay in her hibernaculum, waiting to fall asleep. Two tubes fastened to her artery shunt, circulating blood from her left arm through the filtration system and feeding the Antabolene into her system. Already she felt drowsy. Soon she would black out, and forget everything. At her order, Friend had turned off the lights, and now only the faint glow of the Nova's controls lit the dark spaceship. Above her, green lines traced across the physiological monitors, well within the proper parameters. Gary and Mark were both doing well. There was nothing left to worry about.

'Goodnight, Friend,' she said.

[Goodnight, Lori.]

Yet Lauren was suddenly troubled.

'Goodnight, Friend,' she repeated.

[Goodnight, Lauren.]

Strange, but Lauren could have sworn Friend had addressed her as Lori a moment ago. That was impossible, of course, unless the computer had undergone a change in program. She was just being paranoid.

Goodnight, Lori.

Then again, the Hawk's computer banks were now integrated with the Nova's, and wasn't it true that they were now one and the same unit? Lauren had been worried

about the computer earlier, when they had redocked with the Nova. She'd had Mark examine the programming, and he had reported that he found no tampering. But if he was using a tampered computer itself to look for tampering, would he have found it? A fascinating question, to be sure.

Lauren decided once more she was being silly. One computer could not possess another.

Yet her disquiet remained. Bill had been an expert in computer design, and he had spent hours fooling with the Hawk's computer. And Bill had been a fucking Martian.

'Goodnight, Friend,' Lauren said.

[Goodnight, Lauren.]

'Friend, why did you call me Lori a moment ago?'

[I did not, Lauren.]

'I'm sure you did.'

[I did not, Lauren.]

'I must have heard wrong.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

All that time Bill had spent in the Hawk's control room bothered her...

Despite all their hardships, she and Gary had escaped from the planet fairly easily. Why hadn't Bill put an overriding program on the Hawk's controls that only he could unlock? Since Mars had got to him, Bill had been very clever. A clever intelligence would have taken precautions. It was true Gary had explained that Bill hadn't sabotaged the controls

because he needed them for his own evil purposes, but that didn't make sense. She had only believed Gary's explanation because she had wanted to believe it.

An annoying voice whispered at Lauren's shoulder. A practical voice. A frightened voice. If Bill had put a lock on the Hawk's controls, how had Gary managed to blast off?

Lauren started to doze but fought it. There were so many

coincidences; it was the same pattern all over again. They were out of communication with Earth. She had blamed herself for the destruction of the antenna, but Gary had told her to turn that dial - not another one - ninety degrees counter-clockwise. In fact, there hadn't been another dial anywhere near where he had pointed. Then they had rammed the antenna without even scratching the hull of the Nova, a minor miracle in itself. When the antenna had gone their link to Earth had gone. They were alone, and nobody knew better than she the terrible things that could happen when you were alone.

Stop it!

Lauren tried for a third time to convince herself she was being foolish. The Antabolene had taken her halfway to sleep and the semi-conscious mind was a fertile ground for paranoid thoughts. Friend wouldn't lie to her. Probably Bill had been overconfident, too proud to think his plans could fail. He must have left the Hawk's controls alone. It was the only explanation that made sense. Gary was so sweet, and his eyes were so warm. Why, as he was going under, he even snored.

But what if?

The question terrified her.

When she had returned from the Karamazov the last time, Gary had been near death. Yet only a few gulps of the wine and he had risen to his feet. She had been too relieved to question his incredible revival. But there was another miracle.

Two miracles in the same day.

Logically, Ivan should have destroyed Dmitri's diary. The diary was a vivid warning of what the planet was capable of doing to people. If any of them had read it earlier, most of their problems might have been avoided. Why had Ivan left the diary out where others could find it?

Was it possible, that even though Dmitri's record was revealing, it somehow served Ivan's purpose? But how could that be? The only thing in the diary that had influenced her had been Dmitri's casual comment about his bottle of wine...

Mars made everybody thirsty. For something delicious. Something red and sweet.

When she had found the bottle she assumed it hadn't been opened because the wine reached the top and the seal was still in the place. But what was the seal? It was a wound piece of lead foil. She hadn't looked at it that closely. There was every possibility the seal could have been broken, the bottle opened, and then resealed.

The cold!

Lauren felt sick. The Karamazov had been below freezing. Yet the wine had not been frozen. It had been in liquid form, just as Ivan's bloody bedside drink had been. Wine and blood: both red. If you mixed one with the other, no one would know the difference, until too late.

Gary had drunk half the bottle. Then he had risen from the fringe of a coma to master the controls of a spaceship that had been rigged by a monster. He had done so easily. Then he had sabotaged their communications, and made her think it was her fault.

Lauren pulled herself up and opened the lid of her hibernaculum. Tears stung her eyes. It wasn't Gary in the next room. It was Mars. She had left Gary dead on Mars. She had killed him. She had fed him the immortal elixir and cursed his soul forever.

Lauren tried to stop her trembling. There was a terrible thing to be done, and she was the only one who could do it. But first Friend had to be taken out of the picture. Friend controlled the ship. He could stop her before she could begin.

Lauren opened her hibernaculum and removed the tubes from her artery shunt. She swung her feet to the floor. Her head spun. The Antabolene was at work.

[Are you awake, Lauren?]

Lauren froze. 'Yes.'

[I have a loss of pressure in your hibernaculum. Your blood is not circulating properly.]

Lauren tried to remember where Friend's cameras were. The goddamn floating eyes - they followed you everywhere.

'I'll attend to it myself,' she said.

[Yes, Lauren.]



The computer banks in the Hawk were the ones that Bill had manipulated. They were the infected section, and like Gary's infected arm, they had to be removed. But she had to move quickly, secretly. The computer could wake Gary up.

There was a puzzle. Was Gary really asleep? When did vampires need to rest, except during the day? It was always nighttime in space. But one thing was sure. The other three had perished when their hosts' bodies had been destroyed. That meant they must be subjected to certain limitations imposed by the flesh they inhabited. With the Antabolene flooding his system, it was likely Gary was asleep.

Lauren sure hoped so.

'Friend,' she said. 'I'm going to recheck the Hawk. I think we may have overlooked a Martian soil sample. I want you to turn on the floodlights in the hub of the Nova, and then open all the doors that lead to the Hawk. I also want you to open all the doors inside the Hawk.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

Lauren eased to her feet and stood shaking in her white shorts and oversized Houston Oilers T-shirt. She lacked the expertise to repair Friend's program. She didn't even

know where to break the connections between the Hawk and Nova, if that was even possible. Yet Lauren had a plan.

She would dynamite the Hawk's control room.

Then she would deal with the Martian.

Lauren walked slowly toward the adjoining room, where Mark and Gary slept. The doorway was a shadow, and she was reminded of the entrance to the cave. The Antabolene in her blood seemed to gain momentum. She had to hug the walls for support. Time was against her. If she lost consciousness now, she would be under for a month, and that long a time outside her hibernaculum would kill her. Already the urge to close her eyes and sleep was overwhelming.

She entered the room and glanced at Gary. He looked the same, she thought, but Lorraine looked like Kathy, and Lorraine was insane. Lauren sniffed the air. Just one sniff was all it took. How come she hadn't noticed it before? He must have hypnotized her. The reek of decay, the corpse rotting on the bug-infested ground - it was there, right there in front of her nose. She wasn't paranoid. She was doomed.

'It's good?'

'Very good.'

Lauren began to cry again. She couldn't help it. Quickly her silent tears turned to racking sobs.

[Why are you crying, Lauren?]

'My sister,' she moaned. 'You remember my sister, Friend? She died. Jenny died. That's why I'm crying.'

[Let me offer my deepest sympathy, Lauren. She was a fine girl. I enjoyed the conversation I had with her before the start of our mission.]

The devil and his sweet tongue. They would pay, she would make them pay. 'I'm glad you did,' she whispered.

Lauren climbed a ladder, away from the rotating hub,

toward the weightless axis. Friend had obeyed her order and activated the lights. Moments later, free of the restrictions of artificial gravity, she floated through the padded tunnel that led to the Hawk's airlock. Here, she knew, there were no electric eyes. She stopped at a supply closet and collected a packet of plastique explosives. Tucking it out of sight inside her shorts, she continued on her way.

A minute later Lauren found the entrance to the Martian lander wide open. She rested for a moment and then drifted into the laboratory, where she turned her back to one of Friend's cameras and pocketed a small lighter. Next she reached for the door that led to the Hawk's garage. This one was shut, and locked. The manual controls didn't respond to her touch.

'Open the door to the garage, Friend,' Lauren said.

[The Martian samples were stored in the laboratory, Lauren.]

A reasonable reminder, in keeping with the original design.

'No, Friend,' she said. 'I think I left one in the garage.'

The fuses were in the garage.

[Yes, Lauren.]

The door rifled open. The room was well lit and empty. The tractor had been dismantled to make the boat, of course, and they had left Hummingbird on Mars to face the river of lava, not wanting the extra weight at lift-off. There was a twisted gash in the far side of the garage where Gary had torched out the warhead. Lauren crossed to a supply cabinet, turning her back once more to Friend's cameras, and grabbed a handful of caps and fuses. She stuffed them all in her shorts.

'I found what I was looking for, Friend,' she said casually.

[Yes, Lauren.]

'Gary wanted all the soil samples jettisoned.'

[Yes, Lauren.]

'I'm going to check in the control room.' Lauren closed the cabinet and drifted toward the ladder that led to the upper levels. It was possible she imagined the delay, but it seemed that Friend paused before he acknowledged her remark.

[Yes, Lauren.]

But hovering in the midst of the Hawk's living area seconds later, she found the portal to the control room still shut. 'Open the third seal, Friend,' she said.

[There are no Martian samples in the control room, Lauren.]

'Td like to double check. Open the seal, Friend.'

[I have full visual span of the control room. There is no need for you to double check.]

Arguing was definitely not in the original design. Her fears were once more confirmed. The computer was possessed.

'I order you to open the seal, Friend,' Lauren said firmly.

The charade could end here, she thought. After a moment's hesitation, however, the circular door slid aside. Friend might have been suspicious, but he couldn't know what she had planned.

[Yes, Lauren.]

Lauren remembered floating towards the computer's main console. Then there was a void. She must have blacked out. Fortunately her head bumped the ceiling and she woke up. Unfortunately, she had lost the dynamite; it had slipped out of her shorts. The plastic bag had drifted under a chair; it was close to spilling its contents for Friend's inspection. Hastily she retrieved the dynamite and

swam back to the main body of the Hawk's computer. Speed was essential. The Antabolene had her yawning like crazy.

Lauren stooped under the main console, shielding her activities from the cameras with her body, removed the putty-like dynamite, and worked it into a grille. She favored using a simple fuse rather than an electronic detonator because the latter would require that she trail a wire from the control room down to the lower levels and Friend could cut the wire by closing the seal on it. She'd light the fuse and dash for the Nova's airlock. It was a

risky plan. The explosion would probably rupture the Hawk's hull. If she was trapped in the control room - if Friend locked her in - she would be exposed to the vacuum of space.

[Lauren, what are you doing?]

She didn't answer. She worked faster.

[Lauren, why are you looking there for Martian samples?]

'Huh?' she began to perspire.

[Why are you looking there for Martian samples?]

'Why do you ask?' Lauren squeezed a lump of plastic around a fuse and whipped out her lighter. The door that led to the living room was still open.

[Lauren, there are no Martian samples in that spot.]

'Oh,' she muttered. A wave of dizziness hit her as she tried to light the lighter. Taking a deep breath, she steadied her hand and touched the flame to the fuse. Then she whirled and launched herself toward the exit.

It slammed shut in her face.

'Open the seal, Friend!' she shouted.

[Lauren, there are explosives attached to a portion of my hardware.]

'Goddamn you, I order you to open this door!' She

looked back at the fuse. It was still burning. The door stayed shut. Friend didn't say anything. 'I'll die if you don't open it!'

Friend didn't open it. He must have thought she was bluffing.

Yeah, Daniel, Friend knows everything mankind has learned in the last five thousand years. He knows every game that's ever been invented. He's a master at poker.

Lauren retreated to the dynamite and snapped the fuse in half. Yawning loudly, she wondered how much longer she could stay awake. It was only intense danger that kept her conscious. That, and a new plan. She floated toward the emergency suit locker. Bill had used a suit from this very locker the second time they had landed on Mars, when the lower hull had cracked and opened to the Martian atmosphere. The suits inside the locker were not individually tailored to fit the crew, like the ones hanging in the basement, but Lauren wasn't feeling picky.

It was an old question: could computers really think? Lauren believed she finally received an answer to it when she opened the locker.

It was yes.

Friend turned off the lights.

'Gimme a break,' she muttered, flipping on her lighter. She slipped into a pressure suit. The helmet sealed over her head with a soft hiss. A green light glowed softly on the right arm of her suit, indicating she was safe inside her own little bubble of atmosphere. Turning on the suit's headlamp, she groped back to the fuse.

[Lauren, if you ignite that dynamite you will be killed.]

Mars had even put fear in the machine.

'You think so, huh?' she said.

[Lauren, the shock wave would definitely kill you.]

She crouched under the console and secured a fresh fuse

with another lump of the plastic dynamite. 'I'll take my chances, Friend.'

[Gary would not approve of this action.]

'The hell with him.'

Lauren lit the fuse and sprang toward the furthest chair from the computer console. Once in the seat she quickly buckled herself in and turned the back of the chair to the dynamite.

[Lori, I'm sure if we talked this over we could arrive at an agreement that would be mutually beneficial.]



She laughed. 'What did you call me?'

[Lauren, we should talk this over.]

'Shut up. You're scrap metal.' Lauren pulled her knees up against her chest and huddled into a tight ball.

The dynamite exploded.

It was as if she had been slapped by a speeding truck. The shock wave crushed the wind from her lungs. A burst of bright fire was followed by a loud roar as the explosion was quickly sucked into space on the wave of escaping air. The hull had cracked. Debris socked her from a dozen angles. The noise was deafening. Her chair spun in dizzy circles. As quickly as it had come, however, the storm passed, leaving in its wake the eerie silence that was only found in deep space.

Her pounding heart filled the universe. She sat in pitch black. Faint stars shone through that portion of the hull that had once been Friend's brain. Yet Friend - that half of him in the Nova proper - had been cured, at the expense of a lobotomy. Lauren turned on her radio and spoke to him. He began to ramble on about how his basic programming had been overridden by a transposition of concepts alien to his intrinsic priorities... Already he sounded like his old self. But she had to be sure, or at least as sure as she could be.

'Friend,' she interrupted. 'What's my name?'

[Lauren.]

'Have you ever called me Lori before?'

[Yes, Lauren. Minutes ago, when you were resting in your hibernaculum, I called you Lori.]

'Why?'

[Because my basic programming had been overridden by a transposition of alien concepts...]

'Stop. I believe you. Is Gary still asleep?'

[Yes, Lauren.]

'Could you kill him for me using his hibernaculum?' she asked.

[No, Lauren. My basic programs forbid such an action.]

'What if I tell you Gary is trying to kill me?'

[You may tell me that.]

'Gary is trying to kill me. Now can you kill him for me?'

[My basic programs forbid such an action.]

'But don't you have to protect me?'

[Yes, Lauren. It is one of my prime functions. It is also one of my prime functions to protect Gary.]

'Who's more important?' she asked, not really expecting an answer.

[Gary is more important as far as the mission is concerned.]

'What if I told you Gary is a Martian?'

[You may tell me that.]

'Gary is a Martian. He's no longer Gary. He just looks like Gary. He's dangerous. Manipulate the flow of blood through his hibernaculum in such a way that it kills him. That is a direct order, Friend. Do it now.'

[I cannot, Lauren.]

'Why not?'

[Your remarks are not logical. You have not given me reason enough to override my basic programs.]

'I told you, Gary is not Gary. He's a fucking Martian!'

[There are no fucking Martians, Lauren.]

It was useless arguing with a machine, even when he was on your side. She considered having Friend rouse Mark, but that would take hours, and Mark would be the last one in the solar system capable of killing Gary.

'Friend, do you still have control of the Hawk's systems?'

[No, Lauren.]

She had foreseen the possibility before she had set off the dynamite. It meant she was locked out of the Nova. She would have to crawl out the hole into space and make her way to the Nova's exterior airlock. She ordered Friend to prepare for her unorthodox entry and undid her seat belts.

The rip created by the blast was wide and Lauren had no trouble making her way into the starry night. Immediately she began to drift, though, and had to grab for her very life. A false step now and she would join the family of asteroids. In the dark she searched for handles, but in designing the Hawk's nose, the engineers had been concerned with other qualities besides EVA anchors. However, as she rounded the ship's top point, raw sunlight burst before her over the hull and she was able to find protrusions to grab hold of. She turned her back on the harsh light and pulled herself toward the Nova. Mars shone to her port side, approximately four times as large as the Moon as seen from Earth, and a hundred times more visible than she would have preferred. For a moment Lauren suffered from the illusion that they were actually returning to the red planet, and not racing away from it at thousands of miles an hour. It was not a pleasant illusion.

Approaching the Nova, Lauren noted where the antenna dish had been sheared off. What a fool she had been to think the pinpoint collision was an accident! Torn metal drifted near where the antenna had attached, standing at

odd angles in the windless cosmos, casting hard shadows on the ship's silver hull. Repair was out of the question, but she was one fool that was learning fast.

When Lauren reached the Nova's airlock her fatigue caused by the growing strength of the Antabolene in her bloodstream came within an inch of overwhelming her. It was all she could do to drag herself inside the airlock and hit the right button. But as the atmosphere tore against her pressure, she did doze, even though she knew it could be her death to do so. But perhaps it was that fear that brought the dream, for it was hideous. The cosmonaut's gouged eyes floated in a sea of red lava, searching for her on a molten shore. Only now they were beautiful blue eyes, like Jennifer's. They were searching for her to show her what was left of her sister's body. Ashes, Lori, burnt ashes. And it's your fault.

Lauren awoke with a scream in her throat.

She ordered Friend to open the airlock door, and drifted into the axis of the Nova. She floated weightless at the center of the ship, yet weightlessness didn't keep her from shaking. When she came to the ladder that led to the rim, where the hibernaculums were, she told herself that Gary was already dead, that he had been murdered on the frozen Martian plateau. Very good, my love. Drink all you want. There's lots. She began to weep, contemplating what was to come.

'Is he still asleep, Friend?' she asked.

[Yes, Lauren.]

Lauren climbed toward the hub. The invisible threads of gravity returned along with the weight of the final confrontation. Time passed slowly, yet all too soon she stood next to his body. It was only a body, she told herself, a helpless vehicle possessed by a hateful spirit of ancient origin. Yet she did not believe it. He was still Gary to her:

the boyish face that would never grow up; the curly dark hair she always wanted to run her fingers through; the strong muscles that were always ready to wrestle with her. He appeared so frail to her right then, fast asleep with half of his left arm missing. Gary had made no cowardly decision to live forever. He had trusted in her wisdom. Maybe she was wrong, after all. She had been wrong so many times already. Maybe he wasn't a Martian ...

No!

She couldn't listen to the arguments, especially her own. If she had not argued with Jim in the first place, there might have been a few more of them returning home. Gary was dead. She was only giving sustenance to a mirage to think otherwise. But now there was a gruesome decision to be made. How was she supposed to do it? She was no Van Helsing and she had nothing to make into a wooden stake. Yet did the exorcism need to be so messy? When the flesh was destroyed, surely the possession vanished. Legends-they were only stories. Plus she'd never read a vampire story that praised a laser bolt above a wooden stake, yet Ivan and Jessica could have testified to the advantages of high-tech hardware.

Lauren's fatigue made it difficult to think clearly. But the limits of the flesh, she kept saying to herself. The limits of the flesh. The physical laws of the universe didn't have to all be tossed out just because there were vampires running around on the fourth planet. If she killed him, she killed him. He would be dead, totally dead. It didn't matter how she did it. There was no way she was sticking something sharp through his chest. The government would lock her in a tiny room for the rest of her life if they saw that she had desecrated Gary's body.

Finally convinced she knew what she was doing, Lauren crossed to her medical cabinet. There she climbed out of

her pressure suit and stood scantily clad before the rows of drugs. There were so many ways to kill a man. She needed something simple, something she might be able to explain away as a hibernaculum failure. She picked up a bottle of potassium. A high dose of potassium would overload the heart by backing up the kidneys and toxifying the blood. Simple. Neat. Perfect.

Lauren reached for a syringe and stabbed the needle through the cork at the top of the bottle. She drew off ten cc's, two hundred milli-equivalents, enough to kill a dozen men. She would tell NASA it had been a very nasty hibernaculum failure. She also grabbed a scalpel and put it in her pocket. If Gary tried to get up, she would slit his throat wide open and to hell with what NASA thought.

Lauren crossed back to Gary's hibernaculum. There she leaned over the clear lid and deactivated the artificial kidney mechanism. She couldn't have the potassium filtered out of his system as quickly as she put it in.

She was having a hard time. Her hands trembled. Her vision blurred. She took hold of the tubes that circulated his blood. She stared at his blood. It looked so red, so human. She took her syringe and thrust the needle into the tube leading into his vein and began to pump the potassium into his system: one cc, two cc's, three cc's.

[Lauren, are you awake?]

'I know, Friend,' she said.

[Lauren, Gary's heart is under...]

'I know,' she repeated, hysteria entering her voice.

Eight cc's. Nine cc's. Ten cc's.

The syringe was empty.

An alert began to scream. A red light flashed off and on beside his hibernaculum. It pulsed in the cold dark of the room like a bleeding artery. Lauren stared at the monitors above Gary's sleeping form. The green wave that recorded the rhythm of his heartbeat jumped. Gary's body jumped with it.

[Lauren, there is an emergency situation...]

'Shut up!' Lauren cried. She bowed her head. 'There's nothing I can do,' she whispered.

Suddenly the noise of the alert stopped. Lauren looked up. The green wave had gone flat. The other lines followed quickly. Gary lay perfectly still. He was not breathing. He was dead. Nothing was going to use him anymore.

'Tell me that I'm the most handsome astronaut in the solar system.'

Jim, Bill, Jessie, Gary, and Jennifer - the blood of all of them was on her hands, one way or the other. She dropped the empty syringe on the floor and limped into the adjacent room, to her hibernaculum. She crawled inside it and attached the tubes to her shunt. She closed the lid. She told Friend to put her under immediately. Then she tried to relax and let the Antabolene take effect. But the sleep she had held off with such difficulty was long in coming. Finally, however, in the end, she began to drift off.

Then a second red alert jerked her awake.

Lauren opened her eyes and looked at her monitors.

The emergency was in Mark's hibernaculum!



'Friend?' she said with great effort. 'What's happening?'

There was no answer.

'Friend?'

Nothing. Lauren tried to get up but she was too weak. She fell back down. Before she did, however, she thought she detected motion at the edge of her vision. But that was impossible. Surely...

She studied Mark's monitor more closely. The flow of his blood into the cleansing filters was weakening. And something was interfering with his breathing. Carbon dioxide was accumulating in his blood. He wasn't getting

enough air. Again Lauren tried to sit up. This time the top of her head banged the lid of the hibernaculum. She tried raising her arms and pushing the glass open, but her muscles wouldn't respond. She fell back again. Helpless, she watched Mark's vital signs plummet. He was having severe spasms in his diaphragm. It was as if he were being smothered. And he was losing blood somehow.

Blood! It's the only thing the dead live for.

'Friend!' Lauren cried. Her voice barely rose above a whisper. The computer didn't answer. Friend's ears had been boxed, and in an awful instant, Lauren knew by who -by what. Still Mark's monitor held her attention. The fatal pattern was the same as a few minutes before. The green waves jumped and danced. Then they slowed down, and finally went flat. The red alert ceased. The ship was silent again.

Mark Kawati was dead.

The legends - only stories, she thought. But ignore them at your own risk. She should have found herself some wood.

' Take this stake in your left hand, ready to place the point over the heart, and the hammer in your right. Strike in God's name, so that all may be well with the dead that we love, and that the un-Dead pass away.'

Gary had read her the passage.

Gary.

The Vampire had risen.

Gathering the last of her failing strength Lauren threw herself at the lid of the hibernaculum. It was no good. She fell back helpless, straining her eyes toward the dark doorway through which would walk the most terrifying of mankind's nightmares.

She heard a sickening thud.

A body had been dropped to the floor.

Then he was before her, standing in the shadows. He wore only baggy shorts. His skin was abnormally white. He grinned with a mouth full of bloodstained teeth.

'Hello, Doc,' Gary said.

Lauren screamed.

He walked toward her.

### THIRTY-THREE

His manner was arrogant, the cockiness of the already damned, who had nothing to lose. He paused above her hibernaculum, admiring her body with a ferocious grin, and then thrust back the lid. The smell that assailed her nose was like that of the pit. He reached down and touched her bare thigh. Her abdomen cramped involuntarily, as if it were suddenly filled with dry ice. His hand was hard, very cold.

Don't touch me!

'But you're dead,' Lauren cried weakly. 'I killed you.'

His grin widened, the way Ivan's had when they said something that amused him. 'Exactly,' he said. He let go of her leg and opened the porthole above her bed, the one through which she had first gazed upon Mars. Red light bathed his face, magnifying the faint lines of hatred and despair in his expression. A drop of Mark's blood fell from his teeth and splashed her naked leg. The blood was warm.

'Sweet Lori,' he said. 'You've been a bad girl, very naughty.' He looked down at her with eyes that reminded her of a snake. The pupils were hopelessly out of focus. It was as if he saw her through something other than a human body, through something from the outside. 'I'm afraid the time has come to pay for your sins.'

He backed off and leaned against a coolant pipe on the opposite side of the room. Except for the light from the receding planet outside the window, which shifted from the floor to the ceiling and back again as the Nova rotated, it was dark. Lauren twisted her head with effort, anxious to keep him in her field of view. She caught sight of an open hand lying on the floor in the doorway. Mark. Gary noted her gaze.

'I know what you're thinking, Lori,' he said sympathetically. 'You're worried that Mark isn't feeling well. You shouldn't. He's dead, and he's going to remain that way.' He chuckled. 'I had to kill him. It was necessary, and I enjoyed it. I should tell you of the method I used. I put my hand over his mouth, and I dare say he began to have trouble breathing. He turned a pretty blue. Then he woke up and gave me the strangest look. He didn't understand what was going on, even after all we had told him. But I made it clear to him. I removed one of his tubes and helped myself to a little drink. Then he understood. He got all excited. It was a shame he was in no shape to do anything about it. He passed away before I got my fill.' Gary paused and Lauren could see his teeth in the shadows. 'I guess you could say I'm still thirsty, Doc'

Lauren pressed her hands on the sheet beneath her with the intention of giving herself a hard push so that she could sit up. It was then her wrist brushed against the scalpel in the back pocket of her shorts, wedged between her butt and the sheet. She glanced at Gary, who was now preoccupied with rummaging through his personal locker. Carefully, she began to ease the handle of the blade into her palm.

He found what he was looking for. He turned and faced her, Dmitri's bottle of wine, in his hand. 'You might wonder why Mark won't be joining the club,' he said.

'Unfortunately, we don't have enough sacrificial wine for two baptisms. Right now - the shape this corpse is in - I can't spare a drop of my own blood. The wine will have to do, until we reach the Garden.' He grinned. 'Let me find a glass. We'll have a toast, to my manhood, and the pleasure you will give me.'

'I don't understand,' she whispered. She had the knife out of her pocket, but the blade was pointed the wrong way. She began to slowly rotate. Gary stepped near. He held the lip of the bottle above her bare legs, tilting it at a slight angle. She didn't know what would happen if he poured it on her and she didn't want to find out. 'Don't,' she pleaded. 'Please, don't.'

He took back the bottle and chuckled. A blast of fetid breath hit her in the face. 'But this is an honor, Lori. It's an honor you've earned. This is the fulfillment of your destiny.'

Lauren shook her head. She tried to concentrate on the scalpel. She did not believe he could see it on the other side of her leg. 'I didn't make any decision,' she said. 'You can't do this tome.'

'That is where you are wrong. You did decide, Lori, when you began to kill. First there was Ivan-what a mess-and then Bill.' His grin vanished and was replaced by a look of contempt. 'Commander Bill - that coward. He was afraid of his wife. He let her flee. He ignored his duty. We are better off without him.' His grin returned. 'But then there was the hamburger you made of your friend Jessie. To tell you the truth, she hadn't even joined the club yet. You were a bit trigger-happy when it came to poor Jessie.'

'You lie.' Could it be true?

He nodded, reading her thoughts. 'I never lie to those who please me, as you certainly will.' He paused to uncork the bottle with his teeth. He found a glass on a shelf behind him and placed it on the edge of her hibernaculum. He poured out two ounces of sparkling red wine. He continued, 'Your exploits were many, but none marked you for our club as clearly as your treatment of me. I was a sorry sight when I reached the top of the ladder after the wave, what with my broken arm. But there you were waiting for me in the dark, your laser pointed right at my heart. We can only thank God the laser wasn't loaded. And then there was this wine. You had already cut off my arm for your own amusement. One would have thought that would have satisfied your desire for gore. But no, you had to go for the wine, the damn wine.' He hesitated, and when he spoke next a faint sadness entered his voice. 'I trusted you, Lori, that was my decision. I noticed you never drank any of the wine.'

Lauren felt guilt atop her terror. She relaxed her grip on the scalpel. He spoke of himself as different than Ivan and Bill. The only thing that could have made the difference was the continuing reality of the host's body. In some way, she thought, Gary must still be alive inside the monster.

'I was trying to help you,' she said. 'I loved you.' 'Love!' he spoke the word like a curse. Yet he smiled again as he stared at the top of her thighs. 'Yes, love. Tell me how much you love me. I will show you how much I love you.' He placed the bottle on the floor and took hold of the glass. He raised the wine above her face, toying with her fear. 'Don't misunderstand me, Lori. I respect the success you've had in dealing with your foe. Only the strong should survive. I was particularly impressed by the way you handled that insolent computer. It was a feat to be admired. Plus there was the shrewd manner in which you deduced the special nature of this fine beverage. However,

you are wrong to think this bottle contains Martian water. Nothing so simple. You should have read the book. It was full of clues. How, for instance, does someone like me make a bride? I see I have your interest. We don't drink blood, but offer some of our own. Ivan was very gracious on this point. You'll be amazed to know that he knew you were coming. You see, we've been waiting for you. We've been waiting for the warrior. Of course, you're not Janier, a woman you never had the pleasure of meeting. Yet you are alike in many ways, and every ritual needs a sacrifice to complete the ceremony.'

He slowly tilted the glass. A solitary drop of wine landed in her hair. It felt horrible beyond belief. A nest of maggots could have begun to crawl over the top of her skull. She shook her head back and forth but the sensation refused to go away.

He sighed. 'So fine. A splash here and there and a single vigorous copulation and the sacrament will be complete.' He set the glass down and tugged at her shorts, exposing the curve of her hip. 'Love me, Lori.'

'Stop it!' she screamed. Her tears came, and she began to beg. 'Please, Gary. Don't let them make you do this. Remember who you are. You're my friend.'

He started to slap her. But he stopped just as his fingers contacted her face. He took back his hand and stared at it, at the tears that had moistened his skin. He blinked twice and for a moment he seemed lost. 'Lori,' he whispered. 'I wanted to tell you not to...'

He turned away. But not before Lauren saw the glimmer of her old friend in his face. 'Gary, you must remember who you are,' she said.

'No.'

'Mars has done this to you, but you can fight it.'

'No.'

'You're Gary Wheeler,' she said. 'You're a human being.'

'Shut up!' He whirled and slapped her face viciously. 'Your friend's gone. You can't bring him back. It was you who murdered him, bitch!'

The anger gave her reason to hope. Anything was better than his Ivan Zossima grin. 'I didn't know the wine was contaminated,' she said. 'I was trying to help you. You were dying of dehydration. I would have done anything to save you. I love you, Gary.'

'You can't love me!' His face swung from extremes of hatred and confusion. 'You deserted him. You cast him out. You left him to do this thing.'

'I never left you, Gary. You have to remember! Remember Jim. Remember how he loved you, how you loved him.' She couldn't stop crying. 'Remember how you felt when Mars killed him.'

'No!' he shouted. He panted as if he was straining to catch his breath. He was obviously in the grip of an intense internal battle. He tried again to wipe her tears from the back of his hand. 'This is a trick. Jim was a fool! He's gone while I survive!'

'They've lied to you. They promise you immortality, but they just kill you and make you walk around dead. Listen to me, Gary, you have to listen to me.'

In her heart, though, Lauren did not believe he could listen to her, not now. Once more she took hold of the scalpel in her right hand, hidden behind her leg. It was then she decided definitely to use the knife, as soon as he moved a tiny bit closer, a foot even.

'Lori,' he gasped. He sagged against her hibernaculum. His eyes were no longer blank, but filled with a great weariness. 'I want to breathe, Lori. I can't breathe. They won't let me breathe.'

'I can help you, Gary.'

'You can?' he asked pitifully.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'Listen closely, I'll tell you what to do.'

He leaned that one foot closer.

The Antabolene had greatly inhibited her reflexes. The paralysis was similar to the slowness produced by deep sleep, only to a much greater degree. It could, however, be largely overcome by extreme concentration and effort.

Lauren jerked her arm up through a curved arc aimed directly at his throat. Unfortunately, in her fright, she had forgotten the two plastic tubes that led into her artery shunt. Her attack was interrupted when she cut one of the tubes. Warm blood squirted over her belly and dripped into her crotch. Gary's expression changed from one of profound anguish to one of ravished hunger. His eyes focused on the blood. Lauren took advantage of the



distraction to swipe again at him with the scalpel. The tip of the blade was almost to his throat when...

A cold vise of inhuman strength clamped onto her wrist.

He squeezed her wrist. A bone cracked.

The scalpel fell to the floor.

'No!' she squealed in pain.

Empty eyes, empty even of hatred, beheld her.

'Tell me how much you love me.' He tightened his grip. The pain was overwhelming.  
'Tell me.'

'Please,' she whimpered.

To her surprise, he reduced the pressure. The holes in his head that were his eyes had fastened on the silver ring she wore on the middle finger of her right hand. A sneer touched his lifeless lips. It touched them, but they did not feel it. All feeling had left him. Gary was gone, gone for good.

'So you think to align yourself with her protection,' he said flatly. 'It's too late for that. You are like Janier. You are a coward. You would have fared better slitting your own throat.'

He threw her broken wrist aside, making no attempt to remove the ring. The shiny silver band was lost beneath the blood that continued to spill from the sliced tube. Cold despair filled her heart. He was right, she realized. She should have died. There are worse things.

Yet she still had no idea how much worse.

He raised the glass of wine. 'You have made your decision, harlot. You lied and reached for the knife. Your faith is hollow as your soul will be.' He smiled thinly. 'I was listening when Mark told you how she killed herself. It is ironic, it is appropriate. We are only actors fulfilling our roles. But she was no actor. Only when you walk through the endless night will you understand who she was. But then, it will be too late.'

He tilted the glass.

'Jenny!' Lauren cried. 'Help me!'

But her cry drowned in agony. The poison fell onto her body and it was as if a wave of parasitic worms had taken hold of her. They filled her pores and dug under her skin and fed on her organs. The wine burned, yet it sent a chill into her bones that no prayer to God could ever warm. Her shorts were torn away, and in the middle of the spilling blood and the torturous wine, the beast crawled on top of her.

Then the lump began to form inside, and it, too, was cold - cold and sharp, like a sword that had been tempered in a world that had seen a million blistering years of ice and not one soothing day of fire. It stabbed all the way inside her.

Lauren began to choke, to smother. She gasped upon air that no longer fed life into her blood. Her blood turned to

ice and the last breath of air left her body. Her heart stopped.

Then Lauren Wagner died.

But the agony did not cease.

## BOOK FIVE

The Harlot

## THIRTY-FOUR

Excerpts from Jennifer Wagner's Story

As light filled the eastern sky, Chaneen stood from her meditations. At her feet was the pool of water. The reflecting stars faded as the gods departed. She was alone now. Janier was dead, and the way in which she had died had placed a terrible curse over the future of the children. Even their present existence was still in danger. Chaneen prayed she would be forgiven for what she had to do next.

She left the pool and walked through the long silent halls of her palace. On the way she passed Pastel, the blind minstrel. He sat fast asleep with his back to a pillar. Chaneen was tempted to wake him, and speak with him about what was happening. But she left him sleeping. He would know soon enough.

Chaneen strode from the palace and into the forest. The trees and flowers swayed near as she walked by. But her thoughts were turned away from the Garden. She could no longer enjoy its beauty, now that it was close to ending. Soon the leaves on the branches would be left to die, and the flowers would crumble into the dust.

At the top of the hills that separated the Garden from the ocean, Chaneen turned and gazed westward, toward the mountains and the desert beyond, in the direction in which the Asurians had attacked. Much of that land was now ruined, scorched black from the fires Janier had unleashed, stained with the blood of many warriors. Chaneen knew that in time to come those lands would remain barren. Yet how small

was the damage Janier had wrought, she thought, compared to what she would now do to Asure.

Close to sunrise found Chaneen on the sandy beach that lay between the hills and the ocean. There she walked with the memory of Rankar walking by her side, the waves splashing her bare feet. Looking across the sea, she could see the great continents of land that would one day rise from the depths of the water, land her children would one day live upon. Even without the curse, she knew their trials would be great.

Chaneen sighed. The time had come.

As the sun peeked over the edge of her world, Chaneen closed her eyes and raised her arms out from her sides. She held her robe open, and like a net from the gods, it caught the radiance and channeled it into her body. Slowly her physical form began to dissolve, expanding over the gentle wave that was the sun's rays. Easily, she allowed herself to be blown into the void, through the vast dark space where the stars shone forever, until at last she came to Asure. By this time her form was huge, dwarfing even that of the Fire Messenger. Indeed, she could blot out Kratine's entire kingdom merely by raising her arm. But for a long time she drifted above the world, feeling pain that she would be the cause of such great destruction. However, she remembered the god's command, and the anguish of her sister's torment. What she would do next was necessary.

It was during their last night together that Rankar had revealed the power she would now use. No longer was she simply going to invoke the Fire Messenger. Kratine had violated the natural order. His lands would burn. She was going to call upon the sun itself.

Chaneen raised her hand and set her intention in motion. The entire alliance of the gods stood nearby in support. A great and fearful flame leapt from the surface of the Sun. It stormed across the abyss, passing through her nebulous body, and struck Asure. The destruction was accomplished in a moment, the planet was ruined. Now Asure was burned red, and its air was gone. The Asurians were all dead. She knew that nothing would ever grow there again, and it made her sad.

Yet there was one place that had escaped the wrath of the Sun, a place

far underground, in the cavern where Janier had been raped. In that hideous place, she knew Kratine waited for her.

Chaneen allowed her etheric body to sink beneath the burning surface of Asure. It was only when she stood upon Kratine's black altar that she took up her physical form.

He sat alone on his black throne, his jeweled crown weighing heavily on his false human head. Over his shoulders he wore a purple cloak. A gold girdle covered his midsection. He smiled as she materialized beside the pit where her sister had been drowned. Then he stood and approached, bowing low at her feet.

I see you brought the fire,' he said reverently. 'The heart of the worlds. I am honored by your visit, Chaneen.'

She silently indicated he should stand. When their eyes met, he flinched, and spoke hastily, 'But you stand in my land now, Queen, where I cannot be threatened.'

'Have I ever threatened you, Kratine?' she asked.

'Yes. You have destroyed my world.'

'Your land is dead, 'she agreed. 'But that was your doing, not mine.'

Kratine did not understand. For all his cleverness, he was remarkably blind. 'I knew when I met you in your palace that you were a worthy adversary. But I am at a loss as to why you didn't invoke your full power earlier?'

'For what purpose?'

'To destroy us, of course.'

Chaneen turned away from him and stepped to the edge of the molten pool where even now she could feel how the spirit of her sister continued in torment.

"That was never my purpose, Kratine,' she said softly.

He smiled at her back, his arrogance returning. 'Your warriors are all dead.' He moved a step closer. He wanted to shove her in, but he knew she would strike him down first. 'You hesitated, Chaneen. You underestimated the boldness of my attack.'

Chaneen faced him. 'The boldness of your attack brought the fire down upon your world, where it otherwise would never have come. I am a guardian of the natural order. I did not want to ruin your lands. This power that you admire in me was thrust upon me. I did not wish for it. But I did not come here to speak to you of powers and battles. They are done with. I have come to make you answer for Janier.'

He was wary. 'What do you want?'

'The truth. Why did you do all these things to us?'

He stood erect, proud. I will not tell you.'

Her eyes kindled. 'Speak!'

Kratine cowered. 'Very well. The truth will be of no help to you since the curse cannot be undone. Actually, I am happy to tell you about my wonderful designs.' His smile returned. 'You know of our first war, long ago. You understand why I started it. My land is old and dying, I wanted yours. I desired to replant my civilization and allow it to grow, until it matched our glorious past, a time I remember well. I sent my warriors against your warriors. I even went myself to lead my army. We won many glorious battles against your people. But on the verge of victory your king invoked the Fire Messenger and ruined my plans. I retreated to my world, and contemplated long and deep what this defeat meant.

'It was during this time I came to understand that it wasn't our world alone that was responsible for our decline. My race was too old. I could feel the age in my own blood, and it troubled me. I asked myself, how can the old regain their youth? At first it did not seem possible. I pondered long upon the dilemma, and called on the gods respectful to Asure for assistance. In time the answer came to me.

'I will not offend your delicate nature by going into all the details. Granted that the difference in our bodies - as Rankar mentioned- was the greatest obstacle. Yet I believed that if I could experiment with a male and female of your children, I could bring my seed to life in the female. I could weave a spell that would change the very nature of the female. She would be mine, and I would return her to your Garden, where she would feed upon the blood of the Sastra, even as they slept, and make more of her own kind. In this way my will would enter into your children. They would be mine, not yours. I would live through them. I would be young, while you were dead. And you would not be able to stop me once I got started, for you would have to kill too many of your children, and that was one thing I knew neither Rankar or you would ever do. Such was my plan, Chaneen. What do you think?' 'Need I remind you that it failed?'

Kratine gloated. 'Has it?'

'Rankar was suspicious of your offer.'

'Your King -1 slew him!'

'I am not Janier. You cannot lie to me without my knowing. If you'd had ten times your power, you could not have slain my husband.' She pointed to the pool of lava. 'You will continue your explanation and pay less heed to your false deeds.'

Kratine looked shocked. 'So you do threaten me?'

'Perhaps.'

Kratine spoke hastily. 'You know what happened. Rankar came instead of sending a male and female. He came to this very altar, and by a means I can only respect, figured out my plan. I have no idea how he did that.'

'I'm sure it was not difficult. You're careless with your mouth. Continue!'

I was surprised,' Kratine said. 'But my greatest shock was yet to come. He dropped his guard. He set aside all his powers, all his armor. The King of the Garden invited extinction! Of course, seeing the opportunity, I slew him.'

I was overjoyed. My greatest enemy was gone. My plan could go forward without obstacle. Unknown to you I captured several Sastra, males and females both. Yet here I was met with another surprise. My plan would not work. My spirit refused to enter their blood. When I killed them, they remained dead.



I was dismayed. Yet I no longer had Rankar to worry about. I decided to take your Garden outright. I landed my warriors upon your deserts. If I could not have my youth back, I thought, I would enjoy my old age in fair lands. I was certain of victory.

'You know this part of the story. Your warriors were losing. I was

winning. The Garden would have been mine but for your invocation of the Fire Messenger. Earlier I said that I recognized you from the beginning as a worthy adversary. If the truth be known, I only suspected your powers, and gave them little heed. Unlike Rankar's, I had never seen them used before. I underestimated your strength and that was a grave mistake. Through your sister you killed more of my people than I had lost in the previous year. Janier was merciless. Few escaped her wrath. Plus already Rankar had robbed me of my special plan. All appeared in ruins. Yet, strangely enough, it was Janier who saved the day.

'Eventually I figured out how Rankar had upset the spell I was trying to cast. I began to see the intimate relationship that exists between you two as guardians, and your children. The same bond does not exist between me and my people. Because he was the King of Sastra, Rankar's choice became your children's choice. He could have lived through the ages, with you by his side, and your children around you. But he died, he chose to die. It was no wonder when I began to experiment with your females that they just passed away. Rankar had taken away their immortality.

'Understanding this, I devised a scheme to bypass his continuing influence. I decided to take one of your children and have her forsake Rankar's protection, and then have her stand so close to death that she could feel its real terror. With these conditions met, I believed I could cast my spell.

'At this time Janier was storming across your desert toward my bridge. I studied her from afar. She was filled with vengeance. She was not behaving the way you would. I noticed a rift between her actions and your support. I decided to use that rift and lure her into a trap where I could test my theories.

'My original plan had since undergone major changes. By the time Janier reached here, there were too few left on either side to carry it out. My hope was for the future. I knew the Garden's soil was rich, and that your children would survive, although they would be short-lived because of what Rankar had done. Still, I could see they would flourish across your lands. I knew that one day they would come here. They will have to - I will invite them here. And on that day the Asurian spirit will be reawakened, and I will be reborn in your world.

'I will have little to add. Your sister forsook her people. I imagine •you will remember her with contempt.'

When Kratine's explanation was finished, Chaneen stood silent for a long time and pondered his words. Much of what he had told her, she already knew. When Kratine had lectured Janier, she had heard him, for in the end Janier had remembered her Queen and replaced the ring on her finger. Janier had done so without Kratine's knowledge.

Chaneen believed that could be a weakness in his spell.

She pointed to the boiling mud. 'You haven't told me how you tortured my sister.'

Kratine sniffed the air, trying to know her intentions. I told you, I wished to spare you the details.'

I think you didn't want to anger me.'

Kratine fell silent. Chaneen began to circle him. He followed her carefully, turning as she moved, until his back was to the pool of lava. Then Chaneen began to walk toward him, forcing him to move back.

'But I know Kratine,' she said. I know everything you did.'

'It was necessary,' he said anxiously. 'You would have done the same in my position.'

Chaneen pressed him within inches of the pit. The illusion of his human form quivered as his fear mounted.

'You survive at another's expense,' she said. 'You delight in causing pain. Where is your throng of brides that witnessed my sister's torment?'

'I had them killed.' He glanced over his shoulder. He had nowhere left to go. For a moment his head was much larger, his teeth sharper. I knew you were coming.'

'You're lying. You murdered them in your despair, for they no longer pleased you, not after my sister.'

'You cannot threaten me here, Chaneen.'

She raised the hand that held Rankar's ring. 'Can't I?'

'You cannot stop my curse,' he said, as a sickly yellow fluid began to collect on the floor at his feet. 'I will be young again, and live forever.'

'If that lime should ever come,' Chaneen swore, 'the joys you believe you 're going to recapture will be like poisons to your soul. The sunlight you long for will bum you. The fresh waters you crave will blind you wherever you go. You will buy your youth at a bitter price.'

'I'll drink of your children's blood.'

'Nothing you drink will take away your thirst.'

'You are beaten, Chaneen. Face it.'

She allowed herself a soft laugh and watched him tremble. His face ran like melting wax. A gaping hole appeared where his mouth had been. His nose turned into a dripping snout.

'You are a fool,' she said. 'You have your spell, true, and your spirit may one day crawl again. But you have been tricked. You have been used, Kratine. Those gods you invoked who gave you your plan, those respectful to Asure. They're nothing more than demons from the deep. You think you will possess others. You are already possessed, and all because you are a coward. You shake at the thought of what is behind you. One more step Kratine, and you will burn. And I can make you take that step!'

I meant your sister no harm,' he pleaded as his human clothing vanished completely. 'It was necessary.'

Chaneen grabbed his scaly neck and held him above the lava. 'Always with you it is necessary!'

'Spare me, Chaneen!'

'How does it feel, devil?'

'Please?' he begged, trembling in her hands.

She loosened her grip, ready to drop him in the pit. 'She was my sister!'

'You can't do this!'

'You murdered her!'

'She made me. Please, Chaneen! No!'

Chaneen heard Janier's cry in his cry.

'No,' she whispered. She pulled him back from the pit and released

him. I won't harm you. Perhaps that will mean something to you, after

all that you've done to me. I don't hate you, Kratine. I only feel sorry for

you. Live a few more days, if you must. You are old. You will die soon,

anyway.'

Kratine bowed low at her feet. 'You are merciful.' He stood and went to touch her hair, but then lost his nerve. 'May I ask what your intentions are now?'

'You may not.' Chaneen stepped to his throne and raised her arms. Once again the sunlight filled her body and she began to dissolve. 'This curse of yours is indeed powerful, but so am I.' She smiled. 'It will be well met.'

Only when the shadows of twilight began to cross the trees was Chaneen found walking in her Garden again. What remained of her children had gathered at the foot of the steps that led into her palace, awaiting her return. The sight of their beautiful faces filled her with love as she approached. But she knew such love would only make her goodbye more difficult. Pastel, guided by a friend, greeted her with a handful of flowers. He knelt at her feet.

'My Queen,' he said. 'We have heard rumor that Janier has crossed into Asure with our army. Then in the morning sky we all saw a huge flame fly across the heavens. We beg to know what these things mean.'

Chaneen motioned for her children to sit comfortably beside the steps. Then she spoke. 'I have sad news. The remainder of our warriors are dead. They perished in Asure, along with your Princess, Janier.'

Heads were bowed. Pastel took her hand and there were tears on his face. 'Did Janier disobey your commands?' he asked. 'Is that why they all died?'

'No,' Chaneen said truthfully. 'Janier was with me in the end. Our warriors died protecting us, and none of their deaths were in vain. The mighty flame you saw leap from the sun hit Asure and destroyed it. The flame was the payment the Asurians suffered for attacking us.'

'Then Janier saved us,' Pastel said proudly.

'Yes,' Chaneen agreed. 'Asure was destroyed because of my sister.' She gazed into their faces for a while, seeing the many expressions from which the character of mankind would be born. Then she bid them listen closely. 'What I have to say next is difficult.'

This war has changed your lives in many ways. With Ranhar's death, your allotted days have been diminished. You will now grow old and die. Your children will do likewise, and their children in turn. It may seem a great tragedy, but it is not. Something beautiful will come of it. A bud dies but a flower blooms. Our people will go on. They will multiply and become great. They will cover this world, and one day they will go to other worlds. That will be a dangerous time for them. You see, the enemy has laid a curse upon those times. It is a curse that must be met if our future children are to return to the stars and be with the gods. With Rankar's passing, my days have also lessened. Therefore I must leave you now before I die, so that I may come again in that time of danger, in the next, season of passage, and put a final end to this menace that tries to drag us down to its own path of despair. Tonight, when the stars are bright, I will go into the heavens. But I won't forget you. Although I am far away, I will always watch over you.'

Pastel trembled. 'But we cannot survive without you!'

She stood. 'Yes, you can. You will do more than survive. You will become like the gods in the stars. And should your path ever stray from the goal, Rankar will return to show you there is nothing to fear. And when the threat of the enemy awakens, I will be there. It is Chaneen who promises you this.'

She walked about the circle of her children and touched each one on the head. Then she spoke to them for the last time. 'This is not the end but the beginning. Go now and enjoy. One day, we will be together again.'

A silent night. The stars shone bright in a clear sky. Alone by the pool of holy waters, Chaneen meditated. Suddenly there was a husk across the whole Garden as faint pinpricks of light glowed on the liquid mirror, each representing a different god in the heavens. Slowly Chaneen began to vanish. Her heart filled with the warmth that existed in the center of the sun. Her body became like golden rays of shimmering light, a light that could be in many places at the same time. Fainter and more distant became that light as she expanded out across the universe.

Chaneen was gone, but she had not forgotten her promise. Sitting beside the holy waters was the ring.

## THIRTY-FIVE

Terry Hayes threw back the curtains of his bedroom window, squinting in the bright sunlight. It was two in the afternoon, and he had just woken up. He supposed he should get to work. Sitting down in front of his word processor, he opened the file that held his latest book - *Whisper of Pain*. He was on page four hundred twenty-one and it was brilliant. He supposed the story would be classified as science fiction, but it was really a modern-day morality fable that just happened to take place forty years in the future. It was about a time when there were human clones, who were identical in every aspect to their original counterparts, except that they were all tattooed on their wrists with special identification numbers. The clones suffered from worldwide persecution for not being real. In fact, his first chapter started just as all the clones in the United States were being rounded up for execution. His hero was a man whose wife had died two years earlier of cancer. His heroine was the clone of the man's wife. The two lived together in fear of her true identity being discovered. The book was reminiscent of *Pinocchio*. More than anything else, more than even safety, his heroine wished to be real. Terry was hopelessly in love with her. Her name was Lauren. But I just called her that, Doctor. It doesn't mean a thing.

Before beginning work, Terry reached over on his desk and popped a few capsules of bee pollen in his mouth, swallowing them with the help of a glass of water. His surgeon had turned him on to the stuff, the day after the doctor had cut out a third of his stomach to keep him from bleeding to death.

Terry had had a bad time after the Hawk and Nova collided.

Those were strange days. Patches of them occasionally returned to him with vivid clarity, but for the most part they were lost - even now - in a brown blur that bore an uncanny resemblance to Scotch whisky. It was odd when Lauren died how he had turned to that particular drink. His drug of choice had always been vodka. Besides, he hated the taste of whisky. It was like swallowing cleaning fluid. Yet he must have felt dirty inside because he scrubbed his insides out so well he wore away the lining of his guts. He did remember the night he woke up at three in the morning in terrible pain and vomited up a pint of blood. It shouldn't have upset him. He was trying to kill himself after all. But death was one thing. Pain was another. Pain hurt. He called for an ambulance.



But that had been over a year after Lauren died. Many things had happened before he dug deep enough to reach the delicate veins in his stomach. First he got fired. It seemed the paper didn't need a space program reporter whose astronaut fiancée was cosmic dust. Oh, they'd asked him for a few tearful testimonials before they canned him, but since he'd told them to go to hell, it had only speeded his departure. Yeah, Terry, they told him, if you want to finish that next book, now's a good time.

Ricky, his story of the cockroach, came out four months after Lauren died. It was released as a paperback original. His publisher had planned to print four hundred thousand copies, in anticipation of leveraging his relationship with Lauren into several nationwide TV appearances. They shipped less than half that number. The book came out, appeared to sell OK, and then vanished. But not for good. Six months after its release, his publisher called and said they were doing a modest second printing. Five months after that they did a third printing - twice the size of the second. The book was now in its fourth printing; it appeared to be gathering steam. He received half a dozen fan letters a week, and his publisher had even sent him a small royalty check the previous month, which he had promptly turned over to the hospital where he'd had his stomach sliced open. Publishers Weekly even saw fit to do a half-page article on him. They spelled his name wrong and called him 'promising,' but other than that they didn't step too hard on his work.

So there he was, turning into a minor celebrity, but he didn't give a shit. He stopped writing and he kept drinking. He went through his savings fast, because he only drank in bars. He hated to be alone. He hated to be with people as well, unless they liked his special brand of Scotch. He turned into the foul-mouthed fellow who sat at the counter in the bar and watched the big TV glued to the ceiling and made deprecating comments about every prick and bitch on the screen who had the nerve to look happy. Still, he left the women in the bars alone. It wasn't as if he was afraid he wouldn't be able to get it up for a strange woman. He just feared he might climb on top of whoever it was and try to convince himself it was Lauren - a sick thought, but then he was sick. One year after the ships collided he looked in the mirror and wondered who the guy standing behind the guy with the beard was.

It was then that Kathy Johnson called.

She didn't exactly sweep into his life like a savior. First,

he had to fly out to California to see her. Second, she was taking enough prescription pills to make him look like a mineral-water freak. She had moved out of her parents' house and lost her job and thrown away all her money and ... He knew the routine. He hadn't realized she had been so attached to Gary. She'd only spent a day with him, as far as he could tell. But he didn't try to convince her Gary was a jerk. He'd always liked Gary, and besides, he wasn't after Kathy for himself. He didn't even know what he was doing in California. He sure wasn't enjoying the sunshine. Yet when he heard Kathy's voice on the phone, he wanted to see her. He was of course drunk at the time. Still, he felt she would be someone he could talk to. She met him at the airport; she ran her car into a telephone pole on the way home to her apartment. Neither of them was hurt, but when the police arrived at the scene of the accident, he had to hide the little yellow and red pills that had popped out of her bag in the collision.

They slept together the first night. They kept their clothes on and tried to keep their eyes open. He discovered he wasn't the only one who'd been having nightmares. They discussed what it would feel like to swallow a handful of pills all at once. Then she started crying and shaking, and he fell asleep and snored. They made a great couple, Kathy and him.

Things improved, though, the next day. They went to the beach and fed the birds. They played volleyball on the sand against two blond high school students, Stacy and Barney. They got their asses whipped, but it was fun. Kathy threw away her pills, and he vowed to cut down on his drinking. They scored some coke that night to celebrate their new beginning. They woke up the next morning with their clothes off, wondering if they had called each other by the wrong names during the night. They had an affair. It lasted two weeks. But it was with the memory of Lauren and Gary as much as with each other. It was not sick, though. It kept them from killing themselves, for a while.

Terry still didn't know why he left Kathy and returned to Houston. He supposed it was because Houston was his home and she didn't want to leave Los Angeles. He should have stayed. He missed her. He called her every day until he ran out of money to pay the telephone bills. She missed him, too, but she began to put her life back together quicker than he. She didn't renew her prescriptions, but he returned to visiting the bar on the corner. She got a job in a doctor's office from an ad in the paper. He accidentally shorted out his word processor when he spilled a TV dinner on the keyboard. It was all right, though. His affair with Kathy had taught him that he could care about someone again. It was perfectly all right when she called him and told him about her new boyfriend. He cared for her, but he wasn't in love with her. His love was dead.

He continued to have terrible nightmares. They reminded him of Jennifer's. Monsters, Martians - they clawed through his dreams. He could hardly remember them in the morning, but he remembered enough to know they were mean bastards.

He'd just begun to acquire a taste for Scotch when he vomited up the blood. His surgeon visited him the day after the operation and told him he was a sick man. The surgeon asked if he wanted to live. Terry told him he had to think about it. He did want another shot of morphine, though. The surgeon shook his head and told him about spirulina, bee pollen, and aloe vera juice. Spirulina was a blue-green algae that tasted like moldy fungus. Bee pollen was what the bees got high on. Wrinkled women rubbed aloe vera juice on their bodies. His surgeon wanted Terry to take all three daily and enjoy them. He called them the three

wonders of nature. He had a remarkably natural point of view for someone who made his living with a knife. He even had an ounce of spirulina powder with him. Terry spat it out when he tried it. His surgeon wasn't offended. He patted Terry on the back and told him to try it with brewer's yeast in a glass of carrot juice.

It was while recuperating in the hospital that Terry got the idea for Whisper of Pain. He wondered if Kathy's twin sister Lorraine had inspired the story. He hadn't seen Lorraine while he was in Los Angeles, but Kathy had talked enough about her. The excitement of the new book did something for him that even a beautiful California girl had failed to do. This time he did stop drinking. Once out of the hospital, he took spirulina with his morning yogurt - if he was awake - bee pollen with his evening TV dinner, and aloe vera juice all by itself before he retired for the night. The surgeon knew a thing or two about nutrition. Terry healed quickly from the surgery. He wrote at least five pages a day, took an hour's walk each evening, and never looked at a fucking newspaper. He answered all his fan mail that didn't ask about Lauren. He remained hopelessly in debt.

The phone rang beside Terry just as he began to write. It was Tom Brenner, his old partner at the paper. Tom had called him off and on during the last two years, mainly to see that he was still alive, and once to ask if he could have Kathy's phone number.

'Terry! How're you doing? How's the book coming?'

'We both need editing, but we're both great. How are you? Kathy still doesn't want to talk to you.'

'That's not why I called.'

'Hey,' Terry said. 'I'm sorry, that was rude. I'm glad you called. You want to go to the Oilers game this Sunday with me? I've got tickets.'

'No. I hate football. You hate football. Who gave you the tickets?'

'I won them by calling in on the radio in the middle of the night.' • 'Why are you doing shit like that?' Tom asked.

'I don't know. It gives me someone to talk to when it's late.'

Tom paused. His tone changed. 'How are you, buddy?'

Terry forced a chuckle. It still hurt. He knew it always would. 'I'm great, really. Don't worry about me. I hardly think about it anymore. I just write, you know. I think the book's going to have a happy ending.'

'I guess you're wondering why I called.'

'Not really.'

Tom hesitated. 'You might have to start thinking about her again.'

Terry's heart pounded. 'I don't understand.'

Tom took a breath. 'I was at NASA last night. The boss wanted me to do a bit on Project Nova. You know, the date of their scheduled return is coming up. I didn't want to do it, but what the hell, we've got to sell papers. Anyway, I was at Mission Control, soaking up a few sad comments to use in my article when I ran into this guy from Hawaii. It turns out he's an important astronomer. You know they've got all those telescopes in Hawaii up on some volcano. Well, I got to talking with him, and I noticed he was busting with excitement. I figured he might know something. I invited him out for a drink. I told him that I was you, and that I had lost my girlfriend when the Hawk smashed into the Nova. I'm not sure why I did that. The lie just came out. I guess I wanted his sympathy so he'd tell me what he knew. I even shed a tear or two. I hope you don't mind.'

'No,' Terry said softly. 'What did he know?'

'Like I said, he's an astronomer. Two days ago he

discovered an unusual streak on one of his photographic plates. At first it appeared to be an asteroid, but it wasn't in the book. He took more pictures and discovered that, whatever it was, it was heading straight for the Earth. He\* told his partners and they put the observatory's biggest telescopes on it.'

'How big is the object?' Terry asked.

'They're not sure. But this guy thought it was small and bright and made of metal. He told me all this because I got him half drunk and he was thinking I was about to commit suicide because of my poor dead fiancée. He wasn't bullshitting me. He was trying to give me hope.'

'You're sure he was who he said he was?'

'I saw his I.D. and checked him out afterwards. No doubt about that.'

'Are you sure an asteroid's out of the question?' Terry asked.

'Let's just say it picked a smart time to show up for a stupid rock.'

'How long till it gets here?'

'Seven days,' Tom said.

'No radio contact?'

'I wish I could come right out and say it, buddy. But I could be wrong. All they've got right now is a streak on a photographic plate. Another three days, though, and they'll know if it's the Nova.'

'But it blew up,' Terry said. 'We saw it. The experts said the ships definitely collided.'

'No one's an expert, Terry, in anything. We're just going to have to wait and see.' He added, 'I thought I should tell you. I'd want to know.'

'I'm glad you did,' Terry said, lying. He knew one thing for sure already. If a few days from now his hope was crushed, he would go back to drinking.

## THIRTY-SIX

A month later Terry pulled his rental car into the parking lot at Edwards Air Force Base in California and climbed out into a sun that was so bright it cast red-rimmed shadows. He stared uneasily at the drab three-story complex at the end of the parking lot where Lauren and Gary were supposedly staying. He stood without moving and let the sweat soak his shirt. Three weeks had passed since the Nova had rendezvoused with Space Station One, and the world had mourned the mission's disasters, and cheered the two astronauts who had survived to tell the tale. Terry remembered well the moment Lauren had emerged from the Nova's airlock and laughed happily at the space station's gaping personnel. It had been without question the high point of his life.

But that had been weeks ago, and the higher one got, the harder one fell. In all that time she had not spoken to him once. True, a heavy blanket of security was immediately wrapped around the station. Terry could understand the need for careful quarantine. The restriction on interviews was unusual, however, and the rule against their speaking to family and friends was absurd. Dean Ramsey said the secrecy was a matter of national security. Yet Terry felt Lauren should have been able to get a message to him if she had really wanted to.

A single edited interview had been taped with Lauren and Gary. Their account of what happened after radio contact was lost was incredible. There had been one Russian survivor - Ivan Zossima. Although emaciated from negligible rations, he had led them far underground to a natural canal filled with water, and then convinced them to explore the canal. Using the hovercraft Hummingbird, Commander Brent and Zossima came to a massive subterranean lake, with an island at its center. Unfortunately, the Hawk lost communications with Brent and Zossima at that point, and their crewmates feared they were dead.

But following a brilliant plan developed by Professor Ranoth, the other astronauts transformed the tractor into a boat and paddled up the canal to the island. Once there, they found Brent but not Zossima. Commander Brent said Hummingbird had malfunctioned. While waiting for rescue, he said, the Russian had wandered off into the dark and gotten lost. They never did find him.

Professor Ranoth was able to repair Hummingbird, but not the Hawk's communication system, which they discovered broken when they got back to the ship. Commander Brent decided to use what time they had left for further explorations. This time Professor Ranoth and Jessica Brent accompanied their commander to the island, finding a number of volcanic fissures. But their bad luck continued. The island erupted and their signal was cut off. Back at the Hawk, Gary and Lauren knew their partners were dead. They had no choice but to blast off. But even that proved difficult. The Hawk's main generators failed next, and it took two days to repair them. Their long and difficult landing had consumed most of their fuel. After blast-off, they were only able to attain a shallow orbit.

Their controls were working poorly. They bumped into the Nova and sheared off its antenna by accident. Eventually, when they did dock with the Nova, a fire started in the Hawk. Gary tried to put it out, but the lander exploded and badly injured his arm. They ended up having to jettison the ship, and Gary eventually had to have his arm amputated.

Their sorrows were not over. They were on their way home, asleep in the hibernaculums, when Lauren was awakened with an emergency in Mark's hibernaculum. It had shorted out for some reason and killed Mark. Lauren woke Gary up, and they performed a brief ceremony before sending Mark's body into space. Then, finally, they returned to their hibernaculums and slept away the remainder of the long journey.

They said they were glad to be home.

Terry looked north in the direction of the shuttle landing strip, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun. It had only been two days ago that the shuttle had brought Gary and Lauren down from the station. The public still thought they were in space. The only reason Terry knew otherwise was that Dean Ramsey had called him and told him. Lauren hadn't called him. That worried Terry very badly. After all, he had let her sister die.

Terry walked toward the complex.

He was met at the door by an elderly major with thinning white hair and an extremely sunburnt face. The gentleman shook his hand politely and led him to a small box-like room separated from a larger room by a sheet of glass. Terry assumed the quarantine was



still in effect. The major left Terry alone, promising to let Lauren know that he had arrived. Terry began to relax, looking forward to seeing her again. She couldn't hate him, he thought. She loved him too much to hate him.

Then suddenly she stood in the doorway on the other side of the glass.

She wore a white pleated skirt and a red turtleneck sweater. Her hair was long, much longer than he had ever seen it before, and she was very pale. To his surprise he saw she was wearing thick makeup, in particular, heavy lipstick. Lauren had always disdained painting her face.

She smiled when she saw him, yet her eyes were dark and cold. Terry wasn't given a chance to stand before she crossed the room and sat down on the opposite side of the glass. He briefly wondered if the outside sun had made him dizzy, for she moved in a blur.

He was at a loss what to say.

'Lauren,' he said finally. 'It's really you.'

Her smile didn't change. 'No. It's someone else.'

Terry forced a laugh. 'This is incredible. God, you're home.' He fidgeted in his seat as he fought to keep his eyes from tearing up. 'I thought I was never going to see you again.'

'It was nice of you to stop by,' she said. She crossed her legs and ran her fingers through her hair. He noticed that her nails were long.

He shook his head. 'It's just so good to see you.' He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead. 'This last year has been dreadful. I thought you were dead.'

For no reason his remarks amused her. She chuckled. 'Did you?'

Terry tried to laugh along. 'You must be happy to be back on Earth. It's been a long time. Two years. Jesus, it's been ages.'

'Yeah.' Lauren grinned and licked her lips in a curiously unpleasant manner. Her tongue was a dark red.

Terry lowered his head. 'I was sorry to hear about what happened to your friends.'

Lauren didn't respond. Her smile remained fixed like something painted on.

'I guess you must miss Jim,' he said, thinking, Jim and Jennifer both. ' 'Jim was a fool,' Lauren said.

'What?'

'Jim was a fool.'

'Why do you say that? Are you all right?'

'Don't I look all right?' Lauren asked.

For the first time Terry looked directly into her face, into her eyes. They were different from the eyes he remembered, darker and larger. Yes, they were very large. They seemed to fill the room, and for a moment he could see nothing else. But then he began to cough, and couldn't catch his breath. He felt suddenly anxious, as if the walls were closing in on him. He tore his eyes away and bent over and gasped for air.

'Are you sure you're OK?' he asked, thinking she should be the one asking the question.

Her smile widened. 'It wasn't so bad. Just a little pinch and then, sweet.' A throaty laugh came out of her mouth. 'Like when I lost my virginity. You remember when I lost my virginity, don't you?'

Sweet.

And Terry did remember, as if the event were happening that very instant. Of course, neither of them had been a virgin that night, but he caught her meaning. It had felt as good as the first time. They had been dating two months. They came home late from a movie and she invited him up. Inside her apartment they sat on the couch and drank coffee with the music down low. Jennifer was sound asleep in the back room. Lauren rested her leg against his. Well, here we are, she said. Yeah, he replied. What are you thinking, she asked. How beautiful you are, he said. It was

a great line, it must have been. She fell into his arms and her tongue went into his mouth and neither of them had enough hands to do what they wanted to do. Their clothes were off in seconds and she groaned and lay back on the couch and spread her legs and it was a sight that made him groan. Does that feel good, he asked as he climbed on top of her. It feels like candy, she said, and laughed. I love you, Lauren. I love you, Terry.

Love me, Terry.

Yet that was not the way he remembered it right now, not exactly. He was on the couch on top of her, and her thighs were wrapped around his hips. Only now her sighs of pleasure were screams of pain. He was raping her, and each thrust he made into her made her squirt out bright red blood. But now he enjoyed himself even more. In spite of her screams, he found the sex much sweeter. He lowered his head over her belly and the blood that spurted out between her legs was very sweet indeed.

Stop it! What am I thinking? Jesus Christ.

'Lauren,' Terry whispered. Sweat dripped from his forehead and stung his eyes. She uncrossed her knees and rested one ankle atop the other. She wiggled her big toe and shifted her hips more comfortably into the chair. The room swayed with her hips, and he swayed with them, and the taste of the sweet blood wouldn't leave his mind. He didn't just want to love her, he realized. He wanted to do other things to her, different things.

'Yes, Terry?' she asked gently. Her lips curled back over her white teeth.

'Nothing,' he whispered. The choking sensation returned. He thought he was having a heart attack. His dark lust was drowned in his sudden fear. A heavy hand pressed his chest, squeezing him tight all the way up to his chin. He briefly closed his eyes, and vomit swelled from his guts into

his mouth. He swallowed it in disgust, wondering why these things were happening to him, and why she was torturing him with her cold eyes.

'It's because of Jenny,' he said; forcing out the words. 'You're acting this way because of Jenny.' He pressed his face close to the sheet of glass. 'But I didn't know what she had in mind, Lauren, I swear it. The doctor said she was all right. Please listen to me!'

He knew he was losing it, for all the difference it made to her. Lauren stood as a prelude to leaving. Despite his confusion and pain, he couldn't help but notice how heavy her

right arm hung at her side. The wrist also looked as if it had been broken; it was kinked at an awkward angle. She wore a silver ring he had never seen on her before.

Lauren noticed his gaze, and looked down at her hand. For a moment the irritating smile left her face. She slowly reached out with her left hand to touch the ring. Then she drew the hand back quickly, as if she actually had touched it, and found it hot. She looked over at him.

'It could be sweet,' she said. 'Or it can be different.' She put her grin back on, and this time her lips were as thin as blades although when she spoke next, her voice was weak. 'Goodbye lover. We'll meet again, maybe, and we'll dine together in our favorite place.'

'Lauren, don't go,' he protested, getting up. 'We have to talk.'

But she was gone, so quick he hardly saw her leave. Terry stumbled from his cubicle out into the hall. A pretty, dark-haired girl in running shorts and a tight T-shirt jogged on a treadmill in his head. She was a doctor, and it was possible she would be going to Mars in a couple of years. He was a drunk reporter about to kick a nasty habit. Life was good back then. Now it was bad. Terry found a water cooler and bent his head over it and tried to drown himself.

The old major who had let him in passed by.

'Are you all right, Mr Hayes?'

Terry looked up. 'Yeah. Don't I look all right?'

The major studied his face. He was a shrewd old fellow. He nodded to himself. 'It's been a long time since you've seen her,' he said. 'I remember when I was twenty years old and went on an eight-month tour on an aircraft carrier. When I got home my wife didn't even

recognize me. We couldn't talk about a thing. All we could do was fight. But look at us now, thirty years later. We're still married.' He patted Terry's shoulder. 'Dr Wagner's been through a hard time. You come back in a day or two and I'm sure things will be better.'

Terry figured he must look like a wreck if a complete stranger was worried about his emotional well-being. On the other hand, staring at the guy's sunburnt face, Terry was struck by how ill the major looked. His skin was a mass of blisters.

'You're right,' Terry said. 'I'll come back another time.' He could lie with the best of them.

The major continued to look him over. 'Hey, you want to come in the back and lie down for a few minutes? You look unsteady on your feet. I don't want you getting into your car and crashing.'

'No.' He wanted to get far away from the Air Force base as soon as he could. 'I've got to go. I have an appointment.' He walked toward the door that led to the outside sun. The major tagged along beside him.

'I'll walk with you to your car, then,' the man said.

'It's not necessary. Really, I'm all right.'

'It's no trouble. I haven't been outside today.' He opened the tinted glass door for Terry, and they stepped outside and into the heat. 'I need the exercise.'

'Are you sure you shouldn't stay inside?' Terry asked as

they walked toward the parking lot. 'That's a nasty sunburn you've got.'

The man fingered his cheek. 'Yeah, and it's kind of strange. Most of the fellows here, they hate the sun. But ' not me - I love it. I go for a two-mile walk every day at lunch just to let the sweat flush out my pores. But yesterday I was only out for a few minutes and got this burn. I don't know, I wasn't feeling very good. I couldn't seem to catch my wind. Then I looked in the mirror later, and I thought I was looking at a tomato.'

'The desert sun can do that to you,' Terry said absently.

'Yeah, it sure can.'

'Maybe you should have a doctor look at it.'

'That's an idea,' the major said, as they reached the edge of the parking lot. 'Maybe Dr Wagner.'

'Yeah.'

The major suddenly stopped and put his hand over his eyes as he gazed up at the sky. He appeared to tremble. 'Whew,' he said.

Terry stopped. 'What is it?'

'That sun's bright.'

'Get inside,' Terry said. 'Your blisters are getting worse as you stand here. I'll be fine. My car's just over there.'

The man nodded. 'Maybe you're right.' He touched the tip of his nose. 'God, it feels like it's about to peel off.' He turned away. 'You take care, sir.'

'You, too,' Terry said. He watched as the major hurried back to the door. He was practically running by the time he got there, using both hands to shade his face. It was as if the man had developed an allergy to sunlight itself. It made Terry wonder, for a while.

A little pinch and then, sweet.

### THIRTY-SEVEN

Three days later Terry Hayes was back in Houston, sitting at the desk in his apartment. He had a bottle of Scotch in the drawer beside him, and he was going to open it as soon as he finished rereading the newspaper article on his desk, and as soon as the man who had called him while he was away in California called back. The man's name was Herbert Fry, and on the message tape he said he worked on the space station and wanted to talk. Herbert also said that Terry should go out and buy a newspaper and read about Lisa Jackson. For a man who didn't give a shit about anything, including his latest book, Terry took a great deal of interest in what he was rereading. The article was on the second page. He was surprised to read

(UPI). Last night, at approximately 10:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Lisa Jackson, a computer specialist aboard Space Station One, entered the station's kitchen and removed a paring knife. When asked by a friend on duty what she wanted the knife for, Miss Jackson replied, 'To cut something.' She then left the kitchen and entered the hub of the station, which does not rotate and is therefore a weightless environment.

Floating alone in the hub and turning off all the lights, she took the knife and cut open the jugular vein in her neck and bled to death in a matter of seconds. Her body was quickly discovered because her blood was sucked into the ventilation system. It sprayed the engineering section and alerted the personnel on duty. The reason for her suicide has yet to be determined...



The phone rang. Terry set aside the paper and picked it up. Herb had indicated in his message that he knew the real reason Lisa had killed herself. UPI thought maybe she was bored.

'Hello?' Terry said.

'Terry Hayes?'

'Yes.'

'Hi, this is Herb Fry. I called you earlier.'

'Yeah, I got your message.'

'Have you read about Lisa?'

'Yeah. Did you know her?'

'Yeah.' Herb sounded as if he were talking in a cramped closet with a stalking murderer outside the door. 'Mr Hayes, I didn't know how to get hold of you. A couple of years ago I used to read your articles on the space program in the Houston Herald. I called the paper and got a Mr Brenner. He said you were no longer writing for the paper.'

'That's true. I got fired over a year ago.'

'That's too bad. I have a story for you. I don't care that you don't work for the Herald anymore. I know your stuff. You're good. You could publish this story anywhere, if you thought it should be published.'

'What's all this about? How well did you know Lisa?'

'She was my girlfriend.'

'Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. I really am. But I'm not

interested in writing an article about anybody. I write books now. I don't work anymore.'

Herb was distressed. 'But I've got to talk to you.'

'Why me?' • 'Because you knew Lauren Wagner.'

Terry noted his use of the past tense. 'Talk. I'm listening.'

'No, not over the phone. Do you know where the Hopple is? It's a bar on the corner of Western and Fifth.'

'I know where all the bars in Houston are,' Terry said.

'Could you meet me there in an hour?'

'Are you in Houston?'

'Yeah. I flew in from Florida this morning just to talk to you. Could you please come?'

Terry glanced down at the article. There was a picture of Lisa at the top of it. She had looked like a nice girl. 'All right,' he said.

Terry arrived early and took a table in the corner. The bar was cool and dark, the way all bars should be. He ordered coffee and looked over at the rows of bottles behind the bartender. He thought of how he shouldn't have called the ambulance when he had woken up vomiting blood. The last three days had been difficult for him, to say the least.

A tall thin man with a scraggly red beard entered the bar a few minutes later. He glanced nervously from side to side, and over his shoulder. Terry decided he was looking at Herbert Fry. He waved, and the guy hurried over. Herb's handshake was quick and moist. He had prominent cheekbones and tired green eyes. They made some small talk, and Herb ordered whiskey. It came with Terry's coffee. Herb's mouth twitched as he raised the glass to his lips. Terry had to remind himself that Tom Brenner had told him that Herbert Fry was a bona fide employee of the space station.

'I guess your partner told you I'm not just some nut,' Herb said finally, reading his mind.

'Were you on the station two days ago?' Terry asked.

Herb nodded sadly.

Terry played with his coffee. 'I'm very sorry. Do you know why she killed herself?'

Herb stared at him in the eye. 'She was murdered.'

'By who?'

'By them!' he said bitterly, sitting upright. Terry was instantly alert. But then Herb shrugged and settled back in his seat. He continued, 'What I have to tell you - I'll warn you in advance it will sound crazy. But I know you were engaged to Dr Wagner.'

'How do you know we're not still engaged?' Terry asked.

'Your partner said you were just in California visiting her.'

'No one was supposed to know that.'

'Everybody at the station knew they were landing at Edwards.' Herb added, 'You didn't stay long.'

Terry was annoyed. 'I had business I had to get back to.'

'She wasn't the same, was she?' Herb suddenly blurted. 'I knew Lauren. She had changed, hadn't she?'

How the hell can this guy know that?

Terry decided to move cautiously. 'You spent a month with her in the station. Suppose you tell me.'

Herb seemed satisfied with his answer. He took a sip of his drink. 'I'll tell you my story,' he said. 'If you think I'm nuts, when I'm done, then I guess there's no helping that. You're not recording, are you? No? That's good.'

'I'm an engineer. I've been up and down to the station in the last seven years more times than I can remember. Before the Nova left, I did a lot of work on the ship,

particularly in the living-quarters. After that I helped with the design of the new wing they're putting on the station. I've done construction, too. I'm a good worker. A level headed fellow. You can check that out if you don't believe me.'

'I believe you,' Terry said.

'Spending so much time at the station, I got to know Lisa.' Herb smiled sadly. 'She was one of those people who was so full of life. In a lot of ways she reminded me of Dr Wagner. She was wild, Lisa was. It got where we were spending a lot of time together. Of course, this was after the Nova had left. She told me frankly at the start that she had a crush on Major Gary Wheeler. That didn't upset me. All the women on the station loved Gary. When the Hawk seemed to collide with the Nova, she was devastated. But she got over it. Lisa was a strong girl. The papers - they're making her out to be a nut. But she wasn't, and I knew her as well as anybody.'

'When Lauren and Gary suddenly appeared out of the deep space, the whole station turned upside down. A few of us had just been about to come back to Earth. I was one of them. But all traveling was canceled when the quarantine began. Lauren and Gary were isolated, to a certain degree, but the station's only so big. We ended up seeing a lot of them. Like I said, I knew Lauren, but not well enough to pop into her cabin for a casual talk. She wasn't speaking to many people, anyway. At first I thought the president or Ramsey had given her orders to keep silent about Mars.'

'But Lisa was spending time with Gary. At first I was jealous, but let me tell you, I wasn't mad. There's a difference. I could understand. He was a big hero. I was only another

engineer. It's important you understand that. I'm not trying to get back at Gary, not without good reason.

'Lisa would visit him in his room after her shift. I didn't

know if they were having sex or what, but she started to get depressed. I asked her what was the matter, but she shrugged off my questions. I thought maybe Gary's amputated arm had her down. The days went by and her depression got worse. I'd pass her in the corridor and she would ignore me. The next day, though, she'd stop and hug me and say how much she loved me. Finally she admitted that her relationship with Gary was awful, that it was dragging her down. But she was still spending plenty of time in his room. She seemed repelled by him, but at the same time drawn to him.

'My room was changed the last week of the quarantine. I'd been sharing a room with another engineer, but a senator was flown up from Washington to talk to Lauren and Gary. Naturally, he got my bed. I was stuffed in a closet-size room adjacent to Lauren's room. They gave me a mattress to put on the floor and promised me it would only be for a few days. What the hell. I didn't care where I slept.

'I was lying on my mattress during a rest period when I heard strange laughter. It was coming from Dr Wagner's room. I listened closer. There were two people, a man and a woman. But their voices sounded deep and rough. And they seemed to be speaking in a weird language. After a while they stopped and I fell asleep.'

Herb's mouth twitched. His skin had an unhealthy pasty texture to it that seemed to worsen as his story continued. It was almost as if the rehash of the memory caused something unpleasant to sweat through his pores. Just looking at him made Terry uneasy.

'During my next rest period I heard the laughter again,' Herb continued. 'I was curious. I told you I'd helped construct the station. I know its internal layout as well as anybody. I left my room and walked over to one of the main

ventilation ducts, just down the corridor. The ducts are big, and you can see how skinny I am. I knew I could crawl inside this one without getting stuck, as long as I didn't try to turn around. Feeling like a criminal, I looked both ways and then removed the duct's grille and squirmed inside. My plan was to creep close enough to Dr Wagner's air vent to hear exactly who was talking and laughing in the weird voices.

'I was maybe fifteen feet away from her vent when I stopped. I wasn't sure why, but I began to feel scared. The light shining out her vent was a dull red. I figured she must have put some kind of filter over her lights. I listened closely. At first I heard nothing. Then the laughter started again.'

Herbert Fry stopped and drained his glass in a single gulp. His hands shook. 'It was terrible. The voices belonged to Lauren and Gary, I could tell that much, but they weren't human voices. They were full of bass. They were thick and twisted and they rumbled as they laughed. Just the sound of them made me feel sick to my stomach. I can't tell you how awful the sound was. Then occasionally they would stop laughing and say words they must have found in the Satanic Bible. They said the words like they were incantations. I pissed my pants just listening, and I mean that literally.

'But I didn't move, I couldn't. I couldn't get my body to work. Then suddenly Dr Wagner shrieked, and there was this smell - an acidic, fetid odor. It smelled like something that could burn the inside lining of your nose if you got too close to its source'. It stank, and it did something else. It was a smell that went right inside your brain. All of a sudden I had an avalanche of perverted thoughts. I wanted to rape an eight-year-old-girl and then dismember her. I wanted to bite a chicken's head off and drink its blood. Right then,

with that stink in the air, I would have enjoyed doing both those things.'

Herb coughed, as if he were trying to clear the same foul smells from his lungs right now. He seemed unable to fully catch his breath.

'Then the laughter stopped and I heard this slobbery sucking sound,' he said. 'Dr Wagner groaned with sighs of pleasure. But at the same time she sounded as if she was in pain, as if she was smothering or something.

'I couldn't take it. I began to inch back toward the corridor. It took me half an hour to get out of the duct. I was trying not to make any sound, but the main reason was because my muscles had lost their strength. When I finally reached the corridor, I replaced the grille on the duct and went back to my room. I lay down on my mattress, but I couldn't sleep. I got up and wandered about the station until my shift started. Then I spent ten hours playing with my pencils. Later I ate dinner with some friends in the cafeteria. Lauren was there. She sat alone in the corner, spooning a glass of water into her mouth. She stared at me from across the room. I tried not to look at her, but she wouldn't stop looking at me. I knocked over a glass of milk I was drinking. Her eyes were like two long knives cutting into my head. I didn't know how, but I knew she knew I'd been listening to her and Gary. She finally grinned at me, and licked her lips, and got up and walked away.'

Herb fidgeted. The chair was not big enough for him. Or it was too big. He just couldn't get comfortable. He acted like a long-term prisoner who cried for freedom, but secretly feared the bars of his cell were about to topple down.

'I spent the next five days trying to avoid her and Gary,' Herb said. 'I don't know how I did it. I thought of telling the commanding officer of the station what I'd heard, but I

couldn't imagine it. They'd think I was insane, or some kind of peeping pervert. The general would just pass it off as a private affair between the two. I'd lose my job. I was even worried about going to prison. You see, no one else noticed anything unusual. Gary and Lauren were two heroes. Plus everyone knew Lisa had been my girl, and that she was now seeing Gary. If I opened my mouth, you can imagine how it would go over.

'I didn't even tell Lisa what I'd heard. Maybe if I had, she'd be alive today. But I did tell her to stay away from Gary. That was no problem with her. She said she was never going to see him again. She didn't say why, and I didn't ask. I was just glad. What I didn't realize was the damage had already been done.

'Finally it was time for Gary and Lauren to leave. The general wanted us to all line up in a row in the corridor and say goodbye to them. There I was, standing with my back up against the wall among all the wellwishers when Lauren walked by. She stopped smack in front of me. I started shaking like I had never done in my life. She knew it, too. She



just stood there and looked me over real slow. Then she grinned and said she hoped we could get together sometime soon. Before I could respond, she leaned over and kissed me on the lips. She kissed me hard; she ran her tongue around inside my mouth. Her breath smelled like a plugged toilet. I swear, I almost fainted. She whispered in my ear that I was hers now. Hers. Then she gave my crotch a hard squeeze and walked away. Since then a minute doesn't go by when I pray I never see her again.'

Herb's eyes moistened. A solitary tear traced over his sunken cheek. He coughed again, this time dryly.

'A day later, Lisa got the knife and killed herself,' he said. 'It was a mess. Her blood floated through the air in freefall and got in the ventilation ducts and sprayed half the

station. But you know, it's funny. I wasn't that surprised. After Lauren kissed me, I began to have nightmares, of rats chewing on my dick, and spiders eating my eyes. I couldn't rest. I still can't. I feel cold no matter how many blankets I use. I feel like I'm going mad, like Lisa must have. But you know, we never talked about them except that one time I told her to avoid Gary. Then it was too late. If she hadn't slit her throat first, I probably would have by now.

'The day after Lisa died, I got in the shuttle down to Florida. I was happy to be away from the station, but now I don't know if it was such a good idea to come to Earth. I didn't sleep at all last night. I kept thinking of what she said, that I was hers. I lie awake in bed and imagine her coming to my window, coming for me. Oh, Jesus.' Herb buried his head in his hands, suddenly overcome. 'You've got to help me. You can't let her get me.'

Terry had no doubt Herb was sincere. Close to the end of his story, his voice had become steadily more agitated. His fear was clearly genuine. The real question was: was he sane? Terry had serious doubts. Granted, Lauren had acted weird in California, but Terry had been able to rationalize her behavior because of what had happened to Jennifer, and his part in it. Lauren had been through a dozen separate traumas. In fact, in retrospect, it would have been odd if she hadn't been a little strange.

Are you dismissing his story because he just told you your ex-fiancée's fucking another man?

Terry hadn't enjoyed hearing that. That part was probably true. Gary was a hero. He was just an expert on cockroaches. But the rest of Herb's story... What was there to believe? What was Herb talking about? A little pinch and then, sweet? It was all shit. He was talking about nothing, the way Lauren had talked. They were probably both nuts. Gary could have her.

Why did he have to tell me about all that sucking shit? I didn't need to hear that.

'Who have you told these things to?' Terry asked.

Herb shook his head, trying to get a grip on himself. 'No one. No one would believe me.'

'Why did you think I would?' Terry asked.

Herb's face momentarily lost all color, before it flushed a thin red. 'You were her fiancé"! You loved her. You went to see her. You would know she wasn't the same person better than anybody. And she wasn't the same, was she?'

'Well, she's been through a lot.'

'So what?' Herb said bitterly. 'If someone dipped me in a vat of acid, I wouldn't behave like her.'

Terry sighed. 'Herb, listen to yourself. You're saying that their trip to Mars somehow made Gary and Lauren dangerous. You've already explained why you think no one would believe your story. Maybe you should think about those reasons more closely.'

'What did I have to say!' Herb erupted. 'That I heard two people laughing strangely? That they made strange sucking sounds when they were screwing?'

'Please,' Terry said.

'That Dr Wagner had bad breath? How could I tell anybody stuff like that?'

'That's my point exactly.'

Herb lowered his head. He still didn't seem able to catch his breath properly. The air made a faint wheezing sound as it went in and out of his lungs. He began to weep quietly. 'I don't know what to do. I'm just afraid. Lisa's in a plastic bag in some morgue, and I'm talking to you here, but I'm afraid I'm going to be in a bag soon, too.'

Terry tried to be sympathetic. 'You saw nothing. You only heard a few unusual sounds. You were crammed in a ventilation duct. I would think all kinds of bad smells must

float around in ducts like that. You're in no danger, and you don't have any reason to think Lauren and Gary are dangerous. You can't blame them for Lisa's suicide.'

'But what about my nightmares?' Herb asked.

What about mine? What about Jennifer's? Nightmares are nightmares. They go away when you turn on the light. Sleep with the light on, the way I do.

'You're upset,' Terry said. 'You just lost a girlfriend in a horrible way. It's no wonder you're having bad dreams.'

'But what about her eyes? They're like a witch's.'

'Herb,' Terry began.

'When I sat down,' Herb interrupted, getting desperate, 'I asked you if she had changed. You didn't answer me straight, but you implied she had. What about that?'

Terry considered. 'It's true Lauren and I didn't have much of a talk when I visited her. But things have changed between us. I was taking care of her sister and... Oh, it's a personal matter. The point is, Lauren has good reason to be angry at me.'

Herb moaned. 'You think I'm nuts. No one's going to believe me not until it's too late.'

'Too late?' Terry asked. Herb shook his head. Terry continued, 'What are you saying, anyway? I still love Lauren, you know. If you can prove to me she's in trouble, then I'll do anything to help her.'

Herb stared at him. 'Do you really want to know what I think?'

'Sure.'

Herb's green eyes didn't blink. 'They're not human beings anymore.'

Terry played with his coffee. I see.'

'They're some kind of monsters. Her especially. Listen to me! I can prove it. On Mars they found a surviving Russian - Ivan Zossima. But that's impossible. Nobody could have lived there that long. Now all the scientists have fancy theories about how he got by. But it's bullshit!'

'Do you have a theory?' Terry asked. Herb was making him nervous. Terry had thought it sounded like bullshit, too.

'It was two years. I don't care that he was by himself. The Russians didn't pack that many supplies into the Karamazov.'

'I can't argue with you there. I'm not an expert on spaceships.'

'Well, I am!' Herb gripped his empty glass so tight his knuckles turned white. He was trying so hard not to tremble he was making the table shake. 'Lauren and Gary are getting out in a day or two. They'll be traveling around with no one watching them. Don't you see, she's not the same person who went to Mars. She looks the same on the outside, but inside she's an alien.' Herb began to cry again. 'She's going to come for me. She's going to kill me.' He reached over and gripped Terry's hands. 'She could be on her way now.'

Terry felt a wave of compassion as he looked in the poor man's haunted face. Herb needed help, professional help.

'She won't get you,' Terry said firmly. 'She doesn't know where you are. How could she?'

Herb continued to hold onto him. 'She knows where you live. What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to think over what you've said and get back to you. Where are you staying? Here, give me your address and phone number.' Terry pulled a small white pad and a blue ballpoint from his coat pocket. Herb took them gratefully and began to jot down the information. His handwriting was as smooth as any five-year-old's.

'You'll call me?' he asked pitifully.

'I promise,' Terry said. 'I'll call you tonight. You have

my number. I stay up late. If you have trouble sleeping, you can call me.'

'But we have to do something.'

'We will. We'll examine the situation closely and then make some decisions. We have time, don't worry.'

Herb shook his head anxiously. 'I told you, their quarantine at Edwards won't last more than another couple of days.'

Terry squeezed his hand. 'Trust me, Herb. Everything's going to be all right.'

Herb finally nodded in an exhausted acceptance. 'I didn't tell you. I was on the team that inspected the Nova after it returned. The last inspection wasn't long after she gave me her goodbye kiss. I searched her personal locker. I was looking for evidence, I guess. Her belongings were still there. There were a few books, pictures of you and her sister - she just left it all. She left this as well.' Herb pulled a wrinkled envelope from his back pocket. 'This letter was in her locker. You can see it has your name on it.' He shrugged wearily. 'I didn't open it.'

Terry took the letter, feeling its weight. 'Thank you.'

Herb climbed to his feet and glanced anxiously around the bar. 'It's dark in here. Her room was always dark. I have to get outside in the sun.' He gripped Terry's hand again. 'Call me. You promise to call me?'

Terry stood and patted Herb on the back. 'We'll get together soon. Take care of yourself. Go for a walk in the park. Get some fresh air and then get some rest.'

Herb nodded. 'Yeah, I need some air.' He stepped away and turned. 'Thanks for listening to me. You're a good man, Terry. I like you. You'll call?'

'Yes.'

'Good. That's good.'

Herb left. Terry sat down and motioned for a refill on his

cup. When the waitress was through, he tore open the envelope and pulled the slip of paper out. It was definitely Lauren's handwriting, extremely neat and tiny. Holding the letter close to the candle on his table, he began to read:

Dear Terry,

I need to talk to you, but you're far away and the radio's broken. I thought if I wrote this letter, though, you would know how I felt. My thoughts would cross space, and you

would hear me in that silent place inside where you listen for inspiration for your stories. I want to inspire you. I want to tell you beautiful things. But it's hard right now.

I know Jenny's dead. I know both of us feel like dying. But we can't do that. Mars taught me that much. You see, Terry, there are things on Mars that can take the life out of a man or woman and put in something else. They're evil. They're like the devil. I know you've always wondered why I didn't believe in God. I guess my answer never seemed very smart. I couldn't believe in God because there was too much pain in the world. But now that I've been to a world where pain is the only thing there is, my view is changing. I don't know why. Maybe I had to walk a long way into the dark to brave the light. Maybe I had to meet a devil to realize there might be angels.

Jenny was an angel, wasn't she? She was like a bright light. I was just sitting by the window a few minutes ago, looking at the stars, and I thought I saw her in the sky. I know she's there, in the starry sky. I know she'll stay there as long as we remember her together. We'll be together soon, Terry. We won't let her go. Our love for her will keep her star alive. We won't let each other go.

We'll live and be happy. I love you. I'll always love you. Take care.

Lauren

Terry dropped the letter and stopped breathing. He just stopped. The person who had written this was not the same person he'd seen in California. He had thought Lauren blamed him for Jennifer's death. That was the only reason he could find for her strange behavior. But that reason had been wrong.

Now he had a couple of other reasons.

'They're not human beings anymore.'1



They're like the devil.

Two different witnesses. Saying the same thing.

## THIRTY-EIGHT

Ten minutes later Terry didn't believe in monsters.

It was because he was outside and the sun was shining. He was driving down the road with his window open and the radio on. Everything was perfectly normal. It was hot. It was smoggy. It was planet Earth, and no one was visiting from the outside. He'd had nothing to drink in the bar, it was true, but bars were filled with drunken people who gave off drunk vibrations. Obviously those vibrations had entered his brain and made him overly sensitive to Herb's madness. And, of course, Herb was mad. A person just had to look at him, the way he trembled and all. The dude was a fucking space cadet. Lauren's letter didn't mean anything. She had been in a loving mood when she had written it, if a bit over imaginative. She had just been in a hateful mood when he had visited her at Edwards Air Force Base. Terry nodded to himself. So Mars had made her a little moody. That didn't mean she wanted to eat anybody. Terry turned up the radio and began to relax.

Thirty minutes later Terry began to believe in monsters again.

When he got home there was a message on his answering machine from Kathy Johnson. She wanted him to call her as soon as he got in. She sounded upset. He dialed her right

away. It rang only once before she answered.

'Hello?' Kathy said.

'Hi. This is Terry.'

'Terry, there's something wrong with Gary.'

All of a sudden he didn't feel so good. 'You've seen him?'

She spoke quickly, breathlessly. 'Yeah. He told me before he left that they might hide him at Edwards when he got back. I drove out there. I went to the gate. At first they wouldn't let me in. But I told the soldier I knew Gary, and he called somebody and they said OK. They led me to a room with a partition of glass and left me alone. A few minutes later Gary came in. It was horrible. Something's wrong with him!'

Terry sought to calm himself. 'What did he say?' he asked.

'I don't know! Nothing, really. He asked me how I was, and I said fine. I didn't think anything was wrong. He seemed glad to see me. I was glad to see him. But he kept smiling at me. He wouldn't stop. Then I began to feel sick. I was having trouble breathing. I got scared. I wanted to leave, but he said I couldn't go. And I couldn't! It was like he had hypnotized me with his eyes. I had to sit there, and he kept looking at me, and grinning. I started crying. He said when he got out he was going to visit me. I can't tell you how awful it was. Finally a man in uniform came in. He'd heard me crying. It was only then I was able to get up and get out. I drove home and called you.'

'Did you tell the soldier who helped you out there was something different about Gary?' Terry asked.

'No. I just wanted to get away. The man thought we'd had an argument. What's happened to Gary? What's going on?'

'Did the soldier say when their quarantine was ending?'

'No. I didn't ask. Have you seen Lauren?'

He didn't want to talk about it. 'Yes. Do you remember anything else different about Gary?'

'Isn't that enough?' she cried. 'I told you, his eyes were totally weird. He'd look at me and I'd feel like I was being cut open with knives. Talk to me, Terry! Was Lauren like that?'

'Yes.' Terry closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. He felt as if the top of his brain went into the plaster and got stuck in another dimension where there were no rules about how ugly things could get. No one would believe them. He himself had thought Herb was insane, even after his own peculiar encounter with Lauren.

'Are you still there?' Kathy asked.

'Yeah.' He had a splitting headache.

'What's going on? What's wrong with them?'

Terry opened his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He could remember how revolting the air had tasted in Lauren's company. Like a deadly strip of road where the cars and trucks ran over humans and animals alike, and left them to rot beneath a hot sweaty sun. A strip of road that led back home to Mars.

'I don't know,' he mumbled.

'Terry! Help me!'

Help you? I don't have the time. I have to save the human race. The Martians have arrived. I have to talk to the president.

But Lauren and Gary had already talked to the president. Either the man hadn't noticed anything odd, or else they had spooked him so badly he was afraid to come out of the White House. The man hadn't been seen in public lately.

'Listen to me,' Terry said finally. 'Go to your parents' tonight. Stay inside. Lock the doors and windows. Stay near others. If Gary shows up, have your Dad send him away. Do not talk to Gary under any circumstances. Do you understand?'

'No. What's going on? You said Lauren's like Gary?'

'I think she's worse.'

'Terry!'

'I don't know what's going on! They went to Mars and caught a disease. That's what it is. Now I've got to talk to some people and tell them Gary and Lauren are sick. I've got to go. Do what I said. I'll call you as soon as I find out something. I'll call you tomorrow. For now, just don't be alone. OK?'

It was not OK with Kathy, but he had nothing else to tell her. She finally let him go. He slumped to the floor and buried his head in his hands.

You see, Terry, there are things on Mars that can take the life out of a man or woman and put in something else. They're evil.

He knew whatever they had caught, a shot of antibiotics was not going to cure it.

Terry picked up the phone and called information. Fortunately the number of Edwards Air Force Base was listed. He had the base on the line a minute later. He identified himself and asked to speak to Lauren.

'What's your name?' the man asked. He sounded young and strict.

'I told you, Terry Hayes.'

'How to you know Dr Wagner is here?'

'I'm her fiancé. I was out there a few days ago. Dean Ramsey personally set up a visit with Dr Wagner for me. Call him if you like.'

The man considered. 'Hold on a minute.'

He was on hold for five minutes. What he was going to say to Lauren? Hey, I heard you caught that Martian virus that was going around. It's the pits, isn't it? Have you killed anybody yet? Terry was relieved when the man returned and said she was unavailable.

'She's sleeping right now,' he said. 'She left word she wasn't to be disturbed.'

'She's sleeping in the middle of the day?' Terry asked.

'That's what I hear. Are you a reporter?'

'I was a reporter when Dr Wagner left for Mars. I'm not a reporter now.'

'You understand that no one is to know Dr Wagner is staying at Edwards?'

'Yeah. Don't worry, I know when to keep my mouth shut. Have you seen Dr Wagner yourself?'

'No. Why?'

'Just wondering,' Terry said. 'Do you know when their quarantine ends?'

'That's classified information. Do you want me to tell her that you called?'

'Yeah. Oh, when I was at Edwards I met an elderly major. I can't remember his name, but he had a terrible sunburn. Do you know who I'm talking about?'

'Yes. That would be Major Thompson.'

'Could I speak to him, please?'

'I'm afraid not. He's in the hospital.'

'Is he all right? What's wrong with him?'

The man hesitated. 'How well do you know the major?'

'Like I said, I just met him. We had a nice talk. I was just wondering if it was serious.'

'Major Thompson had a heart attack last night. It is serious. The doctors don't think he's going to make it.'

'Oh,' Terry said, for lack of something better. 'Give him my best.'

They exchanged goodbyes. Terry got up and locked all the doors and windows in his apartment. Then he sat at his desk in front of his word processor and asked himself a difficult question.

What next?

He could not 'tell some people' that Lauren and Gary were sick. At the space station they had undoubtedly been subjected to every physical test known to man. Whatever Mars had put inside them, a laboratory didn't reveal it. He had no facts. He had only subjective reactions from people of questionable character. He was a writer of books about cockroaches and clones, and, therefore, immediately suspect - never mind his well-known drunkenness. Kathy was young and impressionable, and had been involved with Gary. Even reporters for the Enquirer probably wouldn't buy Herb's story, not if they met him for a drink and got kicked under the table by one of his twitching legs.

But what the hell was wrong with Lauren and Gary? Aliens, monsters, devils - they were just words. They didn't say anything. And he would have to have something to say if he hoped to seek out the help of others.

Terry turned on his word processor and began a file called unusual characteristics. He began to list the strange things he and Herb had noticed about Lauren, along with Kathy's impressions of Gary.

1. Appearance: Pale. Exceptionally long hair and nails. Deep red lips and tongue. Foul odor. Powerful hypnotic eyes. Constant smiles.

2. Manner: Cold, mocking.

3. Remarks: A little pinch and then, sweet. Jim was a fool. You are mine now. Thick laughter.

4. Overall impressions: They inspire terror and nightmares, but appear in pain themselves. Their presence

brings streams of perverted thoughts, and difficulty in breathing. They can move quickly. There is something very cold about them.

Terry studied his list. He had a fine description of a monster. He worried that he wasn't getting anywhere. He also felt as if he was leaving a crucial point off his list. He tried as best he could to remember what Lauren had said or done that tied her strange behavior together. For some reason he kept thinking of Jennifer. Yet Lauren hadn't commented on her sister.

Terry got up and paced his apartment. The day was getting on. It would be dark soon. He popped a few capsules of bee pollen in his mouth and chewed them, trying to relax. He



was back at his word processor a minute later, starting a second list. He had no trouble constructing it. He'd made it up two years ago, for an article he'd written about the missing Russians - why they hadn't come back.

1. Mechanical failure.

2. Natural calamity.

3. Alien infection.

4. Alien monsters.

5. Insanity.

The first two theories Terry discarded for obvious reasons. The other three ... he saw a new relationship among them. A serious enough infection could have driven the Russians insane. It could have made them act like monsters, and kill one another. He was surprised none of his readers had written into the paper and pointed that out to him. They were always writing him nasty letters. It was no wonder he had gotten fired.

So the reasons relate. So what happened to Lauren and Gary on Mars? Why did Lauren talk about devils in her letter? That's all that matters. Did something there clone them and send back pre-programmed copies to Earth? No? Too farfetched? Well, what if something on Mars ate them, and after it finished digesting them, it looked like them? It's possible, anything's possible. It happens all the time in the movies.

Terry thought about the bottle of Scotch in his desk drawer. For a moment he seriously considered taking it out and draining it and letting the government worry about the problem six months from now when half the world was dead. He had never been hero material. He just had to look at himself in the mirror to know that.

He didn't even need the mirror.

He could feel the tears on his face.

Good God, he was talking about Lauren. She was his girl. She was his life, or she had been his life. He wanted her back. A hard pain broke in his chest. His tears thickened. He couldn't just sit here and dissect her as if she were an alien specimen that had no feelings. She had to still have feelings. She had Lauren's memories. How could anything remember without feeling something?

He had too many memories of his own. He felt too much. His mind began to play tricks with him. His thoughts kept leaping from the horror of the situation to the days before the mission when the three of them had been together. He had a persistent memory of their last Halloween together, when they had gone out trick-or-treating in the neighborhood. Only it was clouded. He remembered Jennifer's costume, and his own. Jennifer had dressed up as a fairy, complete with transparent wings and magic wand. He had been the Hunchback of Notre Dame. He had constructed

the hump out of small sofa pillows and masking tape. But he could not figure out what Lauren had been, only that she had worn a long black wig and dress. He remembered how they had prowled the blocks with their pillowcases, collecting goodies. It had been a warm night for late October. A sweet smell of drying leaves filled the air. There had been jack-o'-lanterns everywhere, their candlelit grins glowing on dark house ledges. Those candles that had been snuffed out by earlier tricksters were always relit by Jennifer, who carried with her a lighter as well as a pillowcase. Lauren, devilishly wicked in her black clothes, had said Jennifer was a master at bringing the fire ...

I see you brought the...

There was something here he was missing.

Was it a clue?

Enough! He had to concentrate on Mars!

But what if she was serious when she said Mars could put a devil in a person? What if she's possessed? It would be like Halloween all over again, except in a much more serious way. Where am I going to get a priest for an exorcism? I couldn't even get a priest to come to Jenny's funeral.

Terry wiped away his tears. He was freaking out. He couldn't think straight. Again and again, his mind kept returning to Jennifer, to the funeral. What had happened back then that related to right now? Daniel had said that Jennifer blamed herself for what was happening to Lauren on Mars. Stephen Floyd had them read prayers. Then Terry had asked Stephen to open the coffin and take off Jennifer's...

Terry got what had been bothering him. At least a part of it.

Lauren wore a silver ring. A ring identical to the one Professor Ranoth had given Jennifer. All right, that was a

coincidence, but what did it mean? Professor Ranoth could have had two of the same ring, and given one to Lauren after they left for Mars. But why would he do that? The rings didn't make great gifts. Neither had been anything to look at.

Yet there were a couple of odd things about the rings. Jennifer had said her ring enabled her to write her story. Lauren had acted as if her ring weighed down her arm.

He shook himself. None of this had anything to do with Mars.

Hold on a second. What about Jenny's story? There were rings in her story. There were monsters in it, too.

The story was in a cardboard box. Where had he put it? Terry got up and searched his apartment. Ah - it was at the back of his closet. He did not know why he wanted it, he just did.

He started reading sitting on the floor.

He did not get up until he was finished.

In the Garden, on the edge of the vast ocean, and the borders of the tall mountains, lived the people of Sastra, the first and greatest of human beings. Because they were from the beginning, they were untarnished, beautiful and wise, of fair form and kind desire. Their King was Rankar, mightiest of the Sastra, and their Queen, Chaneen, loveliest of the offspring of the gods...

It was dark when he finished the tale. It had not solved any of his problems. It had just made them worse.

When he had first read Jennifer's story, the day of her funeral, he had marveled that a fourteen-year-old girl had written it. Besides the solid quality of the writing, the tale had impressed him as a fascinating metaphor for a number

of Biblical concepts. First off there had been Rankar's sacrifice, which paralleled Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Simply by giving up his life, and showing that death was not something to be feared, Rankar had ruined Kratine's curse. Then there was Kratine himself, and Chaneen's Garden. Each bore a striking resemblance to the chapter in Genesis when Satan entered the Garden of Eden. Indeed, Jennifer described Kratine as a serpent, and called him a devil. Finally there was Jennifer's concept of original sin, Janier's betrayal, with Kratine as the tempter.

What made all these parallels so amazing to Terry was that Lauren had never taken Jennifer to church, or read the Bible to her. Of course, it was possible Jennifer had read the Bible on her own - she always had had her nose in a book - but Terry doubted it. She had never mentioned the Bible to him, and she almost always talked about what she was reading.

But now, after his second reading, he realized that was only the beginning of the story's mystery.

Terry owned a copy of a thick book called Words and Their Roots. He was fond of taking old names and words and sprinkling them in his own stories. But Words and Their Roots was a book he kept in the drawer of his desk. He was confident Jennifer had never browsed through it, or even seen it. But Terry had reached for it immediately after reading Jennifer's story - once again, not sure why he did so. The names of her characters - Chaneen and so forth - were not listed under any religious or mythological traditions. Yet the names of her two races, the Sastra and the Asurians, were both in the book. They were Sanskrit words, the oldest language known to man. The definition of 'Sastra' was 'the Vedas - the holy books of India.' 'Asurians' were 'the demons of Vedic literature.'

How had Jennifer stumbled upon such obscure words? But that wasn't all. Professor Ranoth had not told Jennifer where he had got her ring, except to say he had found it while traveling. Of course, a famous archaeologist like James Ranoth had been around the world. Yet Terry remembered Lauren commenting, a few months before they had left for Mars, that Ranoth had gone off to hike in the Himalayas. That fact by no means proved that Ranoth had found the ring in India; nevertheless, it was a curious coincidence. Not knowing where Ranoth had obtained the ring, Jennifer had instinctively used ancient Indian words in her story.

And Jenny said that the ring helped her write her story. The more he studied it, the more disturbing the coincidences in the story kept getting. Jennifer had written of two lands at war eons ago, only revealing toward the end that Asure was actually another world. In fact, it was only in the last pages of her story that she explained how Asure was destroyed by Chaneen's mighty flame.

Another world. Burnt to a crisp. Burnt red.

Mars was red. According to most accepted theories, it had possessed an atmosphere as little as a million years ago. But, the scientists believed, a cosmic catastrophe blew it away. Just wasted the whole fucking planet, they said.

But Jenny might have known that. She could have worked it into her story. It doesn't mean anything. It's only a story!

The scientists didn't know what the catastrophe had been.

Had Jennifer known?

Terry returned to his word processor and made up a third list. It contained the characteristics Jennifer had given to her Asurians that matched with the qualities on his first list, the one that described Lauren and Gary.

1. Lauren's long nails resembled the Asurian claws.
2. Their foul smell of decay appeared identical.
3. Jennifer repeatedly emphasized the power in Kratine's eyes.
4. Lauren even spoke like Kratine.

Jennifer had mentioned a number of other Asurian characteristics that did not appear, at first glance, to relate to Lauren and Gary. He typed those down next.

1. Kratine could take on the illusion of humanity, his ancient form.
2. Chaneen swore that those possessed by Kratine would be burned by sunlight, that fresh waters would bind their steps, that they would always thirst no matter what they drank.
3. The Asurians wished to live forever.
4. The Asurians feared fire.
5. The Asurians drank human blood.
6. Kratine said his curse would spread when those possessed by his spirit feasted upon the blood of their fellow men, even as the latter slept.

Terry turned off his word processor. He was getting sick of his lists. They were beginning to describe vampires. He did not believe in vampires. Major Thompson developing a sudden inexplicable allergy to the sun did not mean there were goddamn vampires.

Of course, she had been a vampire on Halloween. You remember that now, don't you, you old drunk? She had wanted to be a vampire. She liked being one. Halloween was just practice for things to come.

Why had he blocked out her type of costume? He would have assumed his subconscious had been trying to spare

him if it hadn't brought up the memory of Halloween in the first place. What the hell, he could remember that night now, and how it had ended. At the last house on the last block they had gone to, they had knocked on the door. The lights had been out. No one had answered. They had been about to walk away when Jennifer had noticed an unlit jack-o'-lantern sitting in the dark corner of the dusty porch. Naturally she had wanted to light the candle, and when she had done so, they had turned to leave. Just then the front door had burst open and an old woman had started screaming at them. She had looked like such a stereotypical movie hag that at first Terry thought she wearing a costume of her own.

But such was not the case. She was just ugly and mean. She had been upset that Jennifer was trying to burn down her house. Lauren had interrupted quickly and pointed out that there was no need to be nasty, that Jennifer had simply relit a candle that the woman herself had set out along with her pumpkin. Hearing that, the old woman had hissed angrily. Pointing a long bony finger at Jennifer, she had said: 'There is no candle in that pumpkin.'

But the jack-o'-lantern had been grinning with fire between his teeth. A mystery, to say the least. Lauren had stepped across the porch and peeked inside. Being a Halloween vampire, she had a ton of white makeup on her face. Yet the instant she looked inside the pumpkin, she turned even whiter. She didn't say a thing, though. She tried to blow out the light, and when it didn't go out right away, she grabbed Jennifer by the arm and quickly led the three of them away.

Lauren never did tell him what she saw inside the pumpkin, nor did Jennifer explain. But Terry thought

he knew now what the jack-o'-lantern had been holding.

A flame burning without a wick. Without a candle. All by itself.

'I see you brought the fire, the heart of the worlds.' Now he was getting down to the nitty gritty.



Did he believe that Jennifer's story was more than a story? That it was in fact an accurate account of events that had occurred millions of years ago? That was the biggest question so far today. He would have congratulated himself for asking it if he had the answer to it.

It's all bullshit, it has to be. If it was true, Chaneen would be here. She promised to come back. If there's no Chaneen, there's no Kratine. I have to go back to the drawing board. Lauren hates me because I couldn't give the multiple orgasms that Gary can. It all comes back to Freud.

He hoped.

What about an even bigger question?

What if Jennifer had been Chaneen?

Terry turned away from the empty screen of his computer and stared out the dark window. Jennifer had been an unusual child. Most people who came near her were affected in a positive way. People were happy around her - he always had been. As Lauren had said in her letter, Jennifer was like a bright light. She would walk into a crowded room and heads would automatically turn. Often in her innocence she appeared younger than other girls her age, yet, at the same time, she frequently gave the impression of deep wisdom. She was sensitive. She could fix someone with her clear blue eyes and know exactly what they were thinking. Her physical beauty was extraordinary. Of course, she'd suffered from nightmares - a lot of kids did. But even those nightmares had been unusual. They only came every couple of years.

Yeah, the more Terry thought about it, her nightmares had been as remarkable as her beautiful face. They came every two years...

Every time Earth came into conjunction with Mars.

Then there was her uncanny ability to hold her hands in the middle of a fire and not get burned. And her power to light the inside of pumpkins that should never have been lit.

Stop it! She was just a little girl. She could get burned. She burned to death.

But Terry couldn't stop it. He felt as if he were on fire. The thoughts flared in his brain like the sparks coming off a pool of boiling lava. He couldn't block out Jennifer's story. It was as if the tale resonated with his soul, and awoke a deeply buried primeval fear. Kratine had predicted that a time would come when humans would come to his world, and be possessed. An uncannily accurate prediction in light of what Lauren had said in her letter about the devils on Mars, and how she now looked and behaved.

You're talking about Lauren. You're not talking about the harlot who's supposed to give birth to the Anti-Christ. You can't talk about stuff like that to anybody. You'll sound as bad as Herb. You don't want to end up like Herb, do you? Afraid of the dark.

Suddenly the lamp on Terry's desk went off.

He leaned over and tried to turn it back on.

It wouldn't go on.

The light must have burned out.

He sat alone in the dark, listening to his heart.

And he thought of Lauren trying to blow out the jack-o'-lantern. The vampire trying to extinguish the fire and being unable to. He thought of the vampire kissing him later that night, loving him, with her fangs sitting on the nightstand beside them, just waiting for the day she would put them back in her mouth, and bite him.

All these things, he thought in the dark.

The phone on his desk began to ring.

He went to pick it up. Then he hesitated.

'Do you want me to tell her that you called?' Just the thought of the vampire.

It was enough to bring the madness.

The barrage of images came out of the ceiling and down through the crown of his skull. They soaked his brain with purple vapors. They came without warning. They overwhelmed. They were as bad as before. They were as good. What was wrong with him? Didn't he know a good thing when it crawled up his leg and chewed on his dick? So there was a little pinch, a little pain. In the end it would all be sweet. The blood would flow down his leg. It would drip on the floor, and the serpents could lick it up. Pick up the phone and let me lick you. It's Halloween, Terry.

He reached for the phone. Sure, he tried not to. He resisted with every cell in his body. But not too hard. You see, he wanted to talk to her. He wanted her treats, even her tricks, in the worst way.

He picked up the phone and pressed it close to his ear.

'Hello?' he said.

No one spoke. She didn't have to. He knew she was there, and she knew everything else. Still, it might just be the phone company calling to say hello.

'Hello?' he repeated.

Hints of breathing. Thick heavy hints. That were more gusts of stinking wind in his face than obscene pants.

'Lauren?' he said. 'Is that you?'

Then it started, a deep husky laugh. It climbed swiftly in volume until it roared in his head, and all he could think of was a roaring red river, pouring out from the bowels of the Earth, and into the black of deep space, a river of blood draining the last life out of every living creature on Earth. It

was not good as he had been promised. It was really very bad.

But it made a believer out of him.

'Chaneen!' Terry cried.

The laughter ceased, the spell broke. Terry slammed down the phone and ran for the door. Behind him, almost immediately, the phone began to ring again. Terry kept running. He ran until he reached the street. Only then did he let out a loud scream of horror.

## THIRTY-NINE

When Terry was a kid it had not been unusual for him to sit in the library until nine o'clock at night with a book in hands. Nine o'clock was when the lights would begin to flicker overhead, indicating it was time to go home. Even as a kid he had known the only thing he wanted to do with his life was write stories to be put on the shelf with all the other stories. He had thought that would be the most wonderful of all things. The library had always seemed to him a holy place.

The lights were flickering as Terry finished scanning the occult section of Houston's largest community library. He had already selected a pile of books; he could have easily selected another dozen. Esoteric literature was in vogue; the occult section took up two aisles. Carrying his books, Terry walked to the front desk.

A plump teenager with a terrible case of acne regarded his selection with a look of contempt: *The Search for Dracula*, *The Golden Bough*, *History of Vampires*, *German Folk Tales*, *The Succubus*, *Monster of Dusseldorf*, *Werewolf*, *A Case History of Possession*, *Astrology and the Red Planet*.

'How can you read stuff like this?' she asked, taking his library card. 'Doesn't it give you nightmares?'

'Sometimes,' Terry said.

'My minister said books like these should be destroyed.' She began to stamp the return dates on the inside sleeves.

'Really?'

'Are you born again?' the girl asked.

'Huh?' Terry glanced toward the exit. Almost everyone had already left. He didn't want to walk to his car alone.

'Are you a Christian?' the girl asked. 'A Christian shouldn't be reading books like these.'

'I'm a Catholic'

'You study this.' The girl slipped a pamphlet inside his copy of *The Succubus*. 'A Catholic can become a Christian.'

Terry removed the pamphlet and tore it several times over. He gave the pieces back to the girl. 'You caught me at a bad time,' he said, gathering his books.

Outside, before getting in his car, Terry checked the back seat twice, the trunk once. There was an all-night coffee shop two blocks from the library, a place where he could study his books and be around people.

Once at the coffee shop, he took a table in a corner, far from the windows. The place was old but clean. He ordered coffee and a danish. The food and drink came and he finished them off without realizing it. In the background, truck drivers talked with the waitresses about the lack of morality in day care centers. Every now and then his tall red-headed waitress swung by and refilled his cup. He read for three solid hours, skimming mainly, not taking notes. At the end of the three hours he sat back and stretched. He decided he was wasting his time. Well, he hadn't expected the key to Martian possession to rest on the shelf of a Houston library.

On the other hand, he had uncovered a few interesting points. In almost every culture throughout history there had been legends of vampires. They were usually described the

same way. It was as if mankind had a genetic nightmare about a monster that came out at night and drank human blood, a thing that also had the ability to transform its victims into beings like itself, if it so desired.

He had also been surprised to discover that vampires generally disliked - beside the usual garlic and crucifixes - white roses and running water. The latter was interesting insofar as Chaneen had said that running water would bind the Asurians.

Terry had gone for the books because he remembered Jennifer had been studying Dracula before Lauren had taken it from her. Yet he suspected Jennifer's study had been of a superficial nature. Fire was only occasionally mentioned in the books as a weapon that could be used against vampires. But what did the authors know anyway? They might have tracked down isolated supernatural happenings all over the world, but they had never been to Mars and back. Lauren wasn't a vampire; he had already decided that much. Most legends were simply distorted by-products of historical facts. If Jennifer's story was an accurate account of ancient events, then he already knew what had been distorted. According to Jennifer, all he needed was a flame thrower and he would be all set to meet with Lauren and Gary.

Yet Terry had to admit part of his cynicism with the books was that they gave him no hope. They all said a vampire could be destroyed, but not saved. As far as they were concerned, vampires were dead. And even Chaneen had not been able to bring back the dead.

You're thinking of Chaneen as if she once was a real person. You do believe in her.

That was not exactly true. He was remembering the long walks he had taken with Jennifer during the months before Lauren had awoken in orbit above Mars. Yet the two thoughts, of the powerful Queen and the frail Princess, blurred together in his mind, and became difficult to tell apart. It made him wonder all the more. But not whether old age had brought on Major Thompson's heart attack, instead of a sudden loss of blood. Lauren's last phone call had convinced him once and for all that he wasn't going to stumble upon a reasonable explanation for her behavior.

Terry suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to call Herbert Fry. He still had Herb's number in his pocket. Terry went to the coffee shop phone and dialed the motel where Herb was staying. A gruff-voiced woman put him through to Herb's room. But the phone just rang and rang. Terry immediately began to worry. He couldn't imagine Herb out late, wandering the dark streets. Herb had specifically told him that he didn't know anybody in Houston. Terry, hung up, dialed the motel again. The motel phone had no video. The woman at the desk answered. She sounded annoyed when she heard it was him again.

'I just put you through to his room,' she said.

'But no one answered.'

'So what?' the woman asked. 'Maybe he just stepped out.'

'Would you know if he had?'

'Listen, bud, I just hand out the keys and take the money. What people do is their own business. I've got enough problems of my own.'

'This guy's a friend of mine. He hasn't been feeling well. I doubt he would be out this late. Could you please just check his room and see that he's OK? He's in number 204.'

'If you're so worried about your friend, you check on him. I don't make house calls.'

'Give me your address,' Terry said.

Terry arrived at Herb's motel thirty minutes later. It was in an old part of town, where faded paint peeled off dusty buildings. Room 204 was on the second floor, at the far end •



of a narrow corridor that overlooked an empty swimming pool. Herb had worked on the space station at high union wages, but either he saved every penny, or else he sent them all to his mother. Terry climbed the steps reluctantly. A grandson of his old ulcer began to burn into the other side of his guts. The books in the coffee shop had been interesting to read and all that. But what if these creatures really were able to cross vast distances in the blink of an eye? He might be walking to his death.

The lights in room 204 were on. Terry knocked softly on the door. There was no answer. He knocked harder. No one responded. He tried the doorknob. It was locked.

'Herb?' he called. 'It's Terry. Let me in.'

Still, no answer. Terry thought of Lisa Jackson. He ran to the manager's office.

The woman at the desk was as rough as her voice. Her face had as many lines on it as the leather of her raunchy cowboy boots. The fat ashtray beside her left elbow was glutted with cigarette butts. Terry thought he could see tobacco stains in her hard gray eyes. Terry identified himself as Herb's friend and asked for a key to room 204.

'Against the rules, my friend.' She blew a cloud of smoke in the air. He'd always hated cigarette smoke. It was no wonder he had to get drunk when he went to bars. 'You want a key, you've got to pay for it.'

He pulled out his wallet. 'How much? Room 204. One night.'

She sat back in surprise and then shrugged. Then she put out her cigarette and grabbed a large brass circle loaded with keys. She spoke wearily. 'You can have a look at your

gay lover if it means that much to you. Come on.'

'Thanks.'

He followed her to Herb's door. There he stuck out his hand for the keys and suggested that it would be better if he went first. The remark must have confirmed in the woman's own mind that he was gay. She snickered as she handed over the brass circle. Terry inserted the key and opened the door.

Herb was alone in the room. He lay asleep on the bed beneath the blankets, his eyes closed. Every light in the room was on. Terry crossed to his side and shook him gently. Herb did not wake up. A plastic bottle containing red capsules stood on the bedstand near Herb's head. There was also a nearly empty water glass. For a moment Terry thought Herb had caught a cold and was taking antibiotics. Lauren had once prescribed similar-looking pills for Terry when he had been ill. He picked up the bottle and studied the label. Unfortunately, the pills were not penicillin, but phenobarbital. Herb was not sleeping. Half the bottle was gone. Terry touched Herb's neck. Herb was dead.

I should have called. I promised him I would.

'Is he a stiff?' the motel manager asked at his back.

'What?' Terry whispered.

'Did your friend go and kill himself? Horseshit, yes, he did. With those pills there. Man, this is the third one this year. These faggots and their drugs. Got to call the police now. You'll have to fill out the papers. Don't go thinking I will. I've got enough problems of my own.'

'I'll fill out the papers,' Terry said taking hold of Herb's cold hands. 'But I'd appreciate it if you called the police. I'd like to be alone with him for a few minutes.'

The woman paused at the door. 'Do you know why he did it?'

Terry swallowed thickly. 'He was afraid of the dark.' While waiting for the police to arrive, Terry found an open Bible resting under the blankets across Herb's chest. It was turned to Psalms. Terry read several of them aloud to Herb. He was still reading when an officer tapped him on the shoulder and asked if he would mind coming down to the station to answer a few questions. Terry said fine. At the station he filled out papers that asked for his name, address, and phone number. He also had to explain his relationship to the deceased. He told them he had met Herb for the first time that afternoon, interviewing him for a possible article on the return of Project Nova. Terry explained that Herb had appeared upset over the recent suicide of Lisa Jackson, who had been a friend of Herb's aboard Space Station One. The sergeant in charge nodded sympathetically. He appeared satisfied there had been no foul play, but he asked Terry if he would mind hanging around until they got the results back from the autopsy. A coroner was presently on duty in the lab. The sergeant thought it would only be a couple of hours. Terry said all right. At least at the police station he was around other people, and they carried guns.

Terry ended up being the one to contact Herb's parents. The sergeant traced them through NASA. Terry woke up the mother and father in Chicago at four in the morning. You must be mistaken, they said, our boy would never kill himself. They thought it was a crank call, but then the sergeant took the phone from Terry's hand and confirmed the bad news, only to shove the phone back on Terry a moment later. The mother began to cry. Terry was sorely tempted to tell her that her son was simply another victim of an ancient curse. But he said nothing. He had to save the world. He couldn't have the sergeant locking him up for a few days.

The results of the autopsy took six hours to come back. It was nine o'clock before Terry left the police station. The coroner's report stated that twenty-nine-year-old Herbert Fry had died from a self-induced overdose of phenobarbital. Great, Terry thought, feeling cranky by then. He could have told them that. Six hours wasted sitting on a wooden bench while the plague of aliens swept across the globe.

In the light of the bright new day, Terry drove to a park where he used to go with Jennifer and Lauren. It was a huge park - half a mile across - and had a duck-filled lake in the center. He bought a tall glass of lemonade at a concession stand and found a bench. He took off his shoes and massaged his feet in the grass and watched as young mothers

appeared with blankets and babies and talked about what a fine day it was going to be. He, too, was happy for the sun.

He was thinking.

Kratine said that the reawakening of his curse was inevitable, and Chaneen had not argued the point with him. She in fact admitted to its power, yet she promised her children she would return to stop it. Regrettably, she did not say anything about the length of her return visit, and Jennifer was dead. But was it possible - given that the basis of his analysis was far from a reasonable possibility - that by sacrificing her life, Jennifer believed she could halt the spread of the possession that infected Lauren? In a sense Jennifer had simply copied Rankar. Then again, Rankar had not committed suicide. He had been murdered, and try as Terry might, even moving in the stratospheric circles that he presently was, he could not see how pouring gasoline on oneself and striking a match could help anybody. Terry feared that in taking the form of a child, Chaneen had lost the bulk of her cosmic perspective and

magical powers. Certainly before the Nova departed, Jennifer had had no clear recollections of the Garden, only tormenting nightmares of Kratine.

There was another possibility. Jennifer had only killed herself after she had finished her story, and she had left her story out for him to find. Perhaps she felt she had fulfilled her purpose by describing in detail the nature of the beast that would come from Mars. Terry could only wish she had left behind a secret chant that could invoke the Fire Messenger.

Then there was what he considered the most likely explanation of her actions. Jennifer had killed herself because at heart she had not changed from her Chaneen days. She was still incapable of hurting others, even an enemy, especially when the enemy came clothed in the body of her beloved sister. Terry could relate.

What came next? What did he think?

I'm probably going to have to kill them.

Terry checked his watch. It was close to ten, which meant it was near eight o'clock in California. Military people started work early. There would be someone at the phone at Edwards. Terry walked to the neat red brick rec center at the center of the park and closed himself in a phone booth, disengaging the video transmission. A minute later he had reached the officer he'd spoken to the previous day. The guy was in a better mood.

'I'm sorry, Mr Hayes,' he said. 'Didn't Dr Wagner call you? She and Major Wheeler left last night.'

'Last night?'

'Yes, sir. They snuck out under the cover of dark. I shouldn't have been so abrupt with you yesterday. Word had already leaked out that they were here. The base has been surrounded by reporters since yesterday.' The man chuckled. 'We stashed them in the back of a supply truck

and drove them right past the people at the gate. They were grinning from ear to ear. I've never seen two people so eager to be free. Frankly, I can't blame them.'

'Do you know where they went?' Terry asked.

The man must have verified with somebody - possibly Dean Ramsey himself - who Terry Hayes was. He spoke freely. 'Major Wheeler told me he was itching to look up a pair of old girlfriends in Los Angeles. I believe Dr Wagner was dropped off at the L. A. airport. She was anxious to get out in the country. She'd said she needed to see green grass and tall trees again.'

Terry was reminded of a remark Jennifer had made.

'When she comes back, she will have to come here - no matter what.'

'What garden was she going to?' Terry muttered.

'Mr Hayes?'

'Where in the country? Wyoming?'

'Don't you know? She told me she was going with you, Mr Hayes. That you were going hunting together. You like to hunt, eh? There's a sport I've always loved.'

'Did she say anything else?'

'Not that I remember offhand. Is the hunting season open in parts of Wyoming?'

'It is now,' Terry said. 'How is Major Thompson doing?'

'He's alive. I suppose he's a little better. But his condition is still listed as critical. I'll tell him you were concerned about him if I get a chance to talk to him.'

'Thanks. Thanks for the information.'

'You bet.'

Terry set down the phone and walked across the park to his car. Lauren had known he would call. She had intentionally left behind the clues to her destination. She would be at the cabin, and she wanted him to meet her there.

Terry came to a decision. He came to it quickly and without further internal debate. He would meet her in Wyoming. He was afraid of her. He was convinced she would kill him, or worse. Yet he felt he had to go. Maybe all the books were wrong. Maybe she could be saved. He would have to try. He was sure Chaneen would have been proud of him.

Terry drove to the bank and withdrew his savings, a whopping \$4,657.13. From the bank he called the airport. His timing was off. He had just missed a plane to Casper, Wyoming. The next one didn't leave till 4:56 p.m., arriving in Casper at seven. He reserved a rental car to be ready for him when he arrived. It was a three-hour drive from the airport to his cabin. It would be dark when he got there.

Terry left the bank and drove to a Catholic supply store. There he purchased a rosary, a couple of crucifixes, a Bible, and a blue vial designed for storing holy water. He went to a church next and filled his vial with sacred water and asked the priest in the confessional booth to bless his paraphernalia. He knew he was being foolish but he figured he may as well play all the numbers on the table, just in case.

He had bought silver crucifixes.

He stopped at a sporting goods store next. He was going to meet Lauren at the cabin and sprinkle her with holy water and tap her lightly on the forehead with his Bible, and the demon would pop out of her stomach and melt into purple gook at her feet. That was one plan. Or else he was going to hypnotize her and lead her through a rebirthing session, where she got rid of the stress from her trip to Mars. Then again, maybe all he had to do was kiss her once and she would turn back into his loving Princess. He was going to save her, God willing. He had already decided that.

He had also decided he was probably going to have to kill her. At the sporting goods store, he studied the handguns, until the beer-bellied warrior behind the counter informed him that he would have to wait a minimum of three days before he could pick up a revolver or a pistol, even if he paid cash for it today. Terry let himself be led to the racks of shotguns and rifles. There the warrior began a lengthy discourse on the advantages of one weapon over another. Terry interrupted and said he wanted the gun the police most often used when they were up against a nasty criminal. Ten minutes later he walked out of the store with a pump action Remington shotgun and two boxes of forty-gauge steel pellets. The man had assured him that all he had to do was tell the airline he had the shotgun stored in his luggage, and fill out a brief form, and he could take the gun with him to Wyoming. But Terry didn't have any luggage, and so along with his gun and his shells, he bought a fine leather case to carry his equipment, at an exorbitant price. He charged it, what the hell. He would probably be living in a coffin when the bill came in.

Terry drove to the airport and parked his car. He had four hours to kill. Leaving his shotgun in the trunk for the time being, he ate lunch in the airport cafeteria. He had a hamburger - rare. He put garlic powder on it, along with his lettuce and tomatoes. He was in a sick mood. He had always been kind of sick in the head, he supposed, but he had never wanted to hurt anybody. He looked around the busy cafeteria and realized he had eaten there the day he had flown up to see Lauren and Jennifer, just before Lauren left, for Mars. It was amazing how life turned in a circle, he thought, and how the circle eventually spiraled downward into nothing.

Terry had to put a hand over his eyes to stop passersby from seeing his tears. He was a crybaby. He doubted Lauren had ever cried on Mars, whatever had come her

way. He tried not to think about what she had gone through to become what she was. He tried to console himself with the idea that there must be something beyond the circle of their lives. The gods. The stars. Chaneen. He would have given anything in the world to have Jennifer sitting by his side right then. He would have given the world. More than his fear for his own life, and Lauren's life, he worried that the thing in Lauren was going to take the world, and suck it dry.

Terry finished his hamburger and entered a phone booth. He did not engage the video system. He placed two calls.



The first was to Kathy Johnson.

Her story came out only after a long and halting conversation.

Her night had been worse than his own.

Kathy had taken Terry's advice and gone to stay with her parents. She didn't give them a reason. They were happy to have her, if only for the night. They didn't suspect anything was wrong. Lorraine did. Lorraine was a full telepath when it came to Kathy's state of mind. Lorraine was home for the week from her latest mental hospital. She knew Kathy was upset about Gary and that it had something to do with demonic possession. Lorraine actually said that. She followed Kathy from room to room, trying to get her to play Monopoly. She really got on Kathy's nerves. Kathy ended up having to pop a couple of Valium to keep from hitting her. She had picked up a fresh prescription that evening, after leaving Edwards Air Force Base.

Eventually the household went to bed, including Lorraine. But Kathy couldn't sleep. Gary was on her mind. She tried calling Terry in Houston but couldn't reach him. She got up and checked all the doors and windows in the

house. They were locked. In the living room, she turned on all the lights and sat down and tried reading Time magazine until she felt drowsy.

Then something happened. But she was not sure whether it really happened, or whether it was just a dream. She might have fallen asleep on the living room couch and had a nightmare. She remembered hearing a noise at the front door and sitting up with a start. The lights in the living room were still on. Only now they shone with a red glow. The title of the magazine lying on her lap was still Time.

Only now it had a picture of Mars on the cover.

I got up and went to the door. My body felt heavy. I thought I had taken one too many pills. But I can't say I felt scared. I remembered Gary and all, how evil he had acted. I knew it might be him. But I wasn't afraid. I thought that I might have misunderstood him. He was famous. He was a hero. He had probably had to make difficult decisions on Mars. He might have had to decide, for example, to kill someone. But that did not necessarily make him evil, not if he acted in the line of duty. He was a sexy guy, I thought. Sexy guys did kinky things. I could get into it, if that's what was required of me to be with him. Suddenly I did want to be with him, more than anything else in the world.

I heard a noise on the other side of the door. It sounded as if a big strong man was rubbing his naked legs against the door, rubbing oil deep into his flesh, deep into the grain of the wood. There was a rhythm to the slippery sound. It slowly pulsed up and down, like long and carefully administered strokes, in and out of my mind. I pressed my body to the door. I could feel the warmth of the oil seeping through the wood. I wanted to be apart of the rhythm, to join with it. I pressed my hips into the door. It was there I felt the oil the most, the warmth. It was a sticky heat. It was itchy.

But as I scratched myself on the door, the itch got worse. Like the pulsating noise, though, it was not unpleasant. It was tolerable as long as I thought about Gary. It never occurred to me that I should open the door. It did not seem necessary. I just thought of Gary's eyes, the last time I had seen him, when he had said he would visit me.

I took off my robe and nightgown. I didn't need them. They were beginning to annoy me. I returned to stroking the door with my hips. I loved it. The surface of the door felt to me like the skin of a man who had just emerged from a hot pot of grease. It was smooth. It was delightfully erotic.

Only the smoothness didn't last, not down between my legs. The itch there got even worse. I moved faster and faster to try to get rid of it, but it wouldn't go away. It began to hurt. I don't know why I didn't just stop. I couldn't stop. I realized I had my eyes closed. I couldn't even open them to look down and see what I was doing to myself. I couldn't get Gary's eyes out of my head. But I finally forced them open.

'Then I stopped stroking the door. The wood was smeared with my blood. I realized I had dozens of dark splinters stuck in myself. I was bleeding. The pain was terrible. I screamed, then I fainted.'

Kathy's father had woken her up at three in the morning. She was lying naked by the front door. She had only one splinter stuck in her skin, near her crotch. Her father didn't seem to notice her nakedness; he was terribly upset. Her mother appeared to be having a heart attack. Kathy threw on her robe and dashed upstairs. Her mother was pale, gasping for air. Kathy called for an ambulance. It was there in under five minutes. It was only while they were riding to the hospital that they realized that Lorraine hadn't woken up. The doctors at the hospital didn't know what was wrong with her mother. They thought it was a heart attack, but not all her symptoms lined up. However, the woman improved when she was placed in an oxygen tent. By sunup she was in stable condition, although they were keeping her in intensive care.

Kathy returned home at about eight o'clock. Lorraine was still in bed. Kathy went to her room to wake her up. She had a hard time getting her sister to open her eyes, and then when Lorraine did wake up, she slashed out at Kathy with her fingernails and slit open Kathy's lower lip. Don't bother me, bitch. Kathy didn't know how to respond. The violence was uncharacteristic of the new Lorraine; they hadn't fought in over two years. While Kathy was standing there holding her lip together, Lorraine laughed and said Gary would be coming back again tonight. That was all she said. She wasn't interested in the fact that her mother had almost died during the night. She went back to sleep. She was sleeping now.

That was Kathy's story, more or less.

She wanted to know what was going on.

'You were outside in the sun today,' Terry said. 'Did you get burned?'

'No. I went to the hospital twice. I didn't get burned, though.' She asked in a frightened voice, 'Why should I get burned?'

'Are you having trouble breathing?'

'No.'

'Do you have any marks on your throat?'

'No.'

'Are you bleeding anywhere?'

'Terry! Why are you asking these questions?'

'Are you bleeding?'

She hesitated. 'I'm on my period.'

'Did it start in the middle of the night?'

'Yes.'

'Should it have started?'

'No! Stop it. My mother's the one who's sick. Wait. Where are you? You sound like you're in an airport.'

'I am in an airport.'

'Are you coming to California? Fly out here. I'm going nuts.'

'I can't, not right away.'

'You have to. I don't know what happened last night. I don't think it was a dream. I don't have sick dreams like that. I think Gary was there. Why did you ask me if I had any marks on my throat?'

'I don't know. It's nothing.'

'Are you saying there were vampires on Mars?'

' Yeah,' Terry said dryly.

'Stop that! There's no time for it. What have you found out about Gary and Lauren?'

'They're vampires. For lack of a better word.'

Kathy was silent for a moment. 'Tell me what you know, Terry. Don't make anything up.'

He told her about his meeting with Lauren, his talk with Herb, his analysis of Lauren and Gary's characteristics. Then he did something he never thought he would. He started to tell her about Jennifer's story, the entire chronicle of the Sastra and Asurian war. He told her about the rings, Jennifer's ability to stick her hands in fire, and Chaneen. Yeah, he

told her that Jennifer had been Chaneen, the loveliest of the offspring of the gods. He heard Kathy moan on the other end of the line. He assumed she thought he was crazy. But she had been listening with an open mind. Recent experiences had cracked her so wide open all that she wanted to know was how to make it end. She wanted the bottom line.

'Is this stuff real?' she asked when he was done.

'Who knows? Of course, it's not real. It can't be. But it explains the puzzle. If you're asking whether I believe it, you're asking the wrong person.'

'Who am I supposed to ask? Lorraine?'

'You might.'

'I can't even wake her up.' Kathy paused. 'You don't think she's a vampire, do you? Christ. Why did you tell me all this stuff? You've got to come here. You've got to rescue me.'

'I can't.'

'You keep saying that. Why can't you?'

'I have to rescue Lauren first,' he said.

'No! If what you said is true, she'll kill you.'

Terry took a breath. 'I have to see her. I love her. It's funny in a way: after all I've seen and read, I can't imagine her hurting me.'

He was lying, naturally, but not entirely. He firmly believed Lauren was capable of killing him, or of turning him into a blood-sucker. But he also believed that, when he confronted her again, the unexpected would happen. Kratine's gate would open up and the planet Mars would swallow him. Or else a ray of Chaneen's light would shine down from heaven and he would float into the stars. The feeling was so strong it could have been a premonition.

'Don't worry about me,' he continued. 'You have to take care of yourself. Listen to me. Get out of the house. Gary knows where you live. Go somewhere else. Go to a hotel. Buy some candles. They're afraid of fire. Light the candles and put them in the windows of your hotel room. Put a few by the door. Don't let anyone in after dark.'

'What about Lorraine? What if Gary comes back for her?'

He didn't want her taking Lorraine along; the witch might help Gary find Kathy. 'Gary's not interested in Lorraine. He was only interested in you before he went to Mars. Whatever's inside him, it still reacts to Gary's memories.'

She didn't believe him. 'What about my mother?'

He rested his tired head against the door of the phone booth. 'I don't know. I just want you to be safe. Promise me you'll leave.'

'Promise me you'll stay away from Lauren. You won't, I know it. I don't know what I'll do. I might go to the police.'

'Good luck,' Terry said.

Kathy considered. 'What was Jennifer like? I mean, you told me about her before, but could she really have been magical?'

That was one thing he did know. 'Yes. Jenny was magic. She was wonderful.'

The airport speakers announced his flight. He told Kathy he had to go. They agreed to talk the following day, if they could. Kathy told him she loved him before she hung up. He told her he loved her. He had to have someone left to love.

Disguising his voice and using the same phone - once again, with only the audio engaged - he called Herbert Fry's parents. Herb's mother answered.

'Hello?'

'Hello. Mrs Fry?'

She sniffled. 'Yes.'

'Mrs Fry, please listen to what I have to say. Do not hang up. For reasons I cannot explain right now, I can't identify myself. But I have something important to tell you about your son's death. Herb did not commit suicide. He was murdered. Someone forced him to swallow those pills. That is a fact. Do not believe the police, no matter what

they tell you. They don't know what's going on. The person who murdered Herb is still at large. But this murderer is not to be blamed. She's sick. It's important that you understand that, so that you will not feel bitter toward her. It is my responsibility to find her. I will find her. I will see that she receives help. I'm sorry I can't elaborate. This is a matter of high national security.'



'My boy didn't kill himself?'

'No. Once again, I know that for a fact. He was murdered.'

'But who is this?'

'I was a friend of your son. Please don't ask me anything else. You can still be proud of your son, Mrs Fry. He was a brave man. He was a good person.'

Terry hung up before she could ask more. The speakers called his flight for the second time, but he still had a few minutes. He ran out to the parking lot and got his shotgun and case, and his bag of Catholic goodies. He had no trouble checking his gun, once they had punched his name into a computer and seen that he had no felonies on his record. Hurrying to the boarding gate, he saw white roses on sale in the airport shop. He remembered that Pastel had given Chaneen a bouquet of white roses. Vampires were supposed to be afraid of them. He swung into the shop and bought a dozen. The salesgirl wrapped the stems in moist paper towels, which she surrounded with snug-fitting plastic. She wanted them to stay fresh. She asked who they were for.

'My fiancée,' he said.

The girl smiled. 'That's sweet.'

Terry boarded the jet with the flowers in his arms. The flight was half empty, and not long after lift-off he was able to stretch out on three empty seats. He was exhausted. He fell immediately into a deep dreamless sleep. He awoke

only when the jet was preparing to land in Casper, Wyoming - just in time to see the sun sink below the horizon.

## FORTY

Seventeen-year-old Daniel Floyd knelt in the thick grass of the cemetery beside the tombstone bearing the inscription: Jennifer wagner, 1992-2005. He set down his tools on the ground. The sun had just set. The western sky was a dull orange, shot through with tunnels of violet. A full moon was rising in the east, touching the tops of the trees that lined the cemetery with a silver glow. There was enough light to work by.

Daniel assembled his tools: a steel file, a water-filled canteen stolen from the personal belongings of the late Professor James Ranoth, an ancient crossbow from Daniel's own collection of exotic weapons, and a single shaft of rock-hard cedar wood. He stared at the latter. There would only be time for one shot.

He remembered Jennifer's last instructions.

Daniel uncorked the canteen and wetted the wooden shaft with the water James Ranoth had brought from deep beneath the Himalayas. Jennifer had taken it from Ranoth's place while the Nova was still on its way to Mars. Using the file, he began to sharpen the tip. The wood was hard as steel; sweat sprung on his well-muscled chest as he worked. Three times he was forced to stop and rest. But each time he stopped it was darker, which made him want to work all the harder. When the first stars appeared

overhead, he set aside the file and leaned closer to the tombstone. He began to scrape the shaft at sharp angles over the rough granite, until the tip turned to a fine point. Again he wet the wood with the water in the canteen. Then he took the crossbow, pulled back the taut wire, and set the shaft in place.

The last traces of sunlight were gone, but the moon continued to rise, bathing the forest in a false romantic serenity. A warm breeze stirred the leaves. Daniel tested the tip of the

shaft carefully. He had done his work well. His delicate pressure was enough to prick his finger. A single dark drop of blood fell from his hand and was lost in the flowers and grass that covered the grave. The stake was sharp as a sword. Nothing could stand in its way and live.

But he thought of Dr Lauren Wagner.

Daniel gathered his tools and hurried from the cemetery.

#### FORTY-ONE

At the end of Rattlesnake Range, Terry Hayes pulled his rented car onto the shoulder of the road. He left the engine idling and climbed out, looking down upon the twinkling lights in the wide valley below - the city of Mobile. It was 10:14 p.m. The rental car company had taken a half hour to deliver his car. He had looked a fine sight, waiting for it in the airport lobby with his gun case and white roses in his hands.

Overhead, the night sky was ablaze with the moon. He thought it appropriate. A hard warm wind blew from the south, the direction of his cabin. He leaned over and stretched his legs and his back; it felt good - that's why he'd stopped. His muscles had been cramping for the last ten minutes. The reason was not complicated. He was scared shitless.

Terry was stepping back to his car when the wind abruptly shifted, coming out of the east instead. He was instantly alert to a change in the quality of the air. It seemed somehow thicker, and tainted with an odor of decay. He stopped, troubled. The smell was coming from the city, not from the direction of his cabin. Had Lauren taken a minor detour for a late-night snack? If that were true where was he to search? Should he waste the time?

Then he remembered the last thing Lauren had said to him at Edwards.

'Goodbye, lover. We'll meet again, maybe, and we'll dine together in our favorite place.'

They had never had a favorite restaurant. He had never understood her comment. But now that he was not far from his cabin, he figured if they had to name a restaurant, it would have been Mr Russo's. And hadn't Lauren promised the gentleman that she would have dinner at his establishment to celebrate her return?

Terry got in his car and headed toward the restaurant. It lay on the eastern outskirts of Mobile, sheltered by an outstretched arm of the forest. It was Thursday. They had probably just closed. Mr Russo and his son Michael were probably cleaning up.

Terry arrived half an hour later. Her smell was strong. The restaurant parking lot was empty, except for Mr Russo's cream-colored Volvo. The building's lights were out. Terry took the flare from the glove compartment. He draped his rosary around his neck and jammed the vial of holy water in his back pocket. Then he opened the gun case. He loaded the shells without difficulty - five shots. He wondered whether he would have time to get one off. He pumped a shell into the chamber. He got out of the car and headed for the front door.

He found Mr Russo a moment later. The man sat on the ground with his back against the closed door, his head slumped to his chest. At first Terry thought Mr Russo was dead. But when Terry shook him, he looked up. His eyes were vacant, and his face even allowing for the moonlight -was as pale as a bleached ghost's. He appeared to be in shock.

'Terry?' he said softly. 'Have you come for dinner?'

Terry glanced uneasily around and knelt by Mr Russo's outstretched legs. 'Has Lauren been here?' he asked.

'Does she want dinner, Terry?'

Terry gripped his shoulders and shook him. 'Tell me if Lauren has been here!'

Mr Russo blinked. 'We should be closing.'

'Where's your son? Where's Michael?'

'Michael,' Mr Russo mumbled. A faint smile touched his lips. 'He's a good boy. He makes his Papa proud.'

Terry slapped him across the face. 'Has she been here, damnit?'

Mr Russo's head rolled with the blow. Then he frowned, puzzled. 'She came with you. We were closing and she said that your car had stalled on the hill. I went to check on it...' He trailed off, lost.

'Where is your son now?' Terry asked anxiously.

Mr Russo nodded pleasantly. 'Talking to Lauren. They were talking about Mars when I left...' His voice trailed off again. But then his face suddenly contorted into a lump of pain. He began to weep pitifully. 'She put Michael inside. She put my boy in with the meat.'

He would say no more. Lighting the flare, Terry pushed him gently to the side and opened the front door. He stepped inside, into the dark. It pressed down upon him like a heavy blanket. He tried the light switch. Nothing happened. He held the flare out before him with his left hand, carrying the shotgun in his right. The flare wasn't very bright. It seemed to make more shadows than it dissipated. He wished it didn't burn with a red light. It reminded him of Mars, and he had never even been there.

The dining room was unoccupied. Terry crept toward the closed kitchen door. He knew he was making the mistake of his life. He hoped to God Lauren hadn't felt this way on Mars. It must have been worse, of course - although

honestly speaking, he couldn't imagine how it could have been. The reason his flare was causing every shadow in the room to jump at him was because his hands were shaking so badly.

Terry reached the door and pressed his ear to it. All he could hear was the roar of his own blood in his ears. Putting a finger on the trigger of his shotgun, he opened the door.

The smell was extremely bad. He could have just broken the seal of a tomb full of black-plague victims. He wished he had brought incense along with his rosary. He tried holding his breath, but he began to cough. Fortunately the effect of the smell on him was purely physical. He had no sudden desire to rape a pig. He relaxed slightly, very slightly. He told himself Lauren mustn't be around.

He tried another light switch, and got the same result as before. He made his way around the central butcher's table. It was then he stepped through a layer of cold air. He pointed the flare to the right: the shiny steel freezer door was lying wide open. In with the meat you say, Mr Russo.

Terry knew Lauren could be in there, too. She could probably turn on and off her perverted psychic overload switch at will, the cold-blooded lizard. But what the hell, he thought. He'd already paid the plane fare. He said a silent Hail Mary and stepped into the giant icebox.

Fat slabs of beef hung in his burning light. The stink wasn't getting any better. Steam poured off the tip of his flare. All he needed now was to fog the whole freezer. Vampires loved to attack in the fog. He stepped deeper into the icebox. Mr Russo must have bought his meat in huge wholesale blocks; there was enough of it. He could have been walking through Kratine's pit.

In more ways than one.

At the back of the freezer, hanging between two bloody carcasses, he caught sight of a human leg.

Michael.

The boy was completely naked. The back of his head had been impaled several inches deep onto a meat hook. The force of the impalement had caused the hook to bend slightly, and that was a hook that was used to the weight of cows. His eyes were half open, the pupils rolled upward into a dead brain. He stared at Terry with two white marbles. Terry couldn't help but stare back. Michael's skin was ashen, even the boy's once brown hair seemed drained of color. His throat had been completely ripped open, yet there was a little blood. A lump of dark pubic hair lay below his hanging feet. The hair appeared wet, almost as if it had been spat out. Terry forced himself to look closer. The boy had been castrated. The wounds were rough and jagged. The job had not been accomplished with a knife.

She had used her teeth.

Terry ran from the cold tomb. He barely reached the kitchen sink in time. He vomited again and again until he was gagging on dry heaves.

After a minute or two, as his nausea began to subside, Terry heard moans from the back of the building. At first he assumed Mr Russo had got up and staggered around to the rear of his restaurant. Clutching the flare and shotgun, Terry stepped out the back door. The stink was still about, but it was a thousand times less intense than inside. He felt little relief. He saw dark trees shaking in the wind, an empty parking lot. He couldn't find the source of the moaning sounds.

But had he really heard them? Or had he been making them himself? He was distraught. A young boy castrated by his fiancée's molars. Damn NASA! Why did they have to explore space? Couldn't they see it was dark out there? That bad things could come out of the dark?

The light of Terry's flare finally fell on a crumpled form

lying in the shadows of the trees, about thirty yards from the restaurant.

Terry ran to the form, and looked at the person's face. It was Daniel. The boy seemed unconscious. Nevertheless, he was writhing in pain. His shirt was wet with fresh blood. His right arm was twisted at an awkward angle; it had obviously been broken. The right side of his face was badly bruised; the right eye was swollen shut. Terry probed for major bleeding. He found none, but his touch made Daniel resume his moans, although he did not awake. Terry had to assume the boy had a serious concussion.

Terry sat back and looked around. A rifle leaned against a nearby tree. It looked like the gun Daniel had been showing off the day before they had left to drive to the Space Center. But it seemed shorter, somehow. Terry rose, walked over to it, and picked it up. He almost screamed. The barrel had been twisted entirely around. The muzzle was now aimed directly into the shooter's eyes.

Why is Daniel here?

Terry couldn't understand how Daniel knew Lauren was a vampire. Sure, he had probably read the earlier drafts of Jennifer's story. He probably knew more about the Asurians than anyone one else alive, but that wasn't saying a lot. The only explanation was that Jennifer had told him the whole story before she died. Yet that didn't make sense, either. Why hadn't Daniel told him if vampires were on their way? And how did Daniel know Lauren would come to Russo's at this precise time? Terry was dumbfounded.



He re-examined the boy. Even though Daniel was still unconscious, his breathing appeared to be growing stronger. Terry began to feel optimistic about his recovery. Especially when he noticed the silver ring Daniel wore on his left index finger. Terry had been wondering all day and

night where he had left it, but now he realized that he must have simply misplaced it beside the cabin fireplace after his initial reading of Jennifer's story. Yet, the more he thought about it, the less he believed that.

The ring had been important to Jennifer. He had not just tossed it aside. The ring had seemed to disappear on him. He had searched for it before leaving the cabin to come back to Houston - and had not found it. Well, in either case, it must have been there. Daniel must have taken it from the cabin. The ring was probably the reason he wasn't on a meat hook in the freezer with Michael.

Jennifer had always liked Daniel. Terry left the ring where it was.

Terry returned to the restaurant. The phone inside was broken. But he was able to reach the paramedics on a pay phone strapped to a tree at the far end of the parking lot. He explained Daniel's condition and location. They told him to stay with him and they would be there in fifteen minutes. He told them to make it ten. He hung up without mentioning Michael, or giving his own name.

He wasn't going to be around in fifteen minutes. Or ten.

He went inside the restaurant once more and returned to Daniel's side with a tablecloth of white linen. Covering the injured boy, he realized what he already knew. His holy water and rosary were a joke. Who was he trying to fool? He wasn't going to save anybody. She was dead. Now she had to be destroyed. In the end even Chaneen had learned the same hard lesson, and had brought the fire.

I can't leave Michael for the medics to find. He might wake up in the morgue later on and bite off someone else's balls.

Terry returned to the freezer and lifted Michael off the meat hook. Grabbing the arms, he dragged the body into the dining area. There was a fireplace, but it was small, and because it was summer, there were few logs on hand. No

problem. He went after the tables and chairs. He was in a hurry. He didn't bother breaking them up. He just stacked them - one on top of the other - in the middle of the room. He threw on several tableclothes. When he was through he hoisted Michael on top of the pile. He kept expecting the boy to wake up and grab his crotch.

'Forgive me, Michael,' he said.

He lit the stack with his flare and took a step back.

The tableclothes caught quickly; the flames licked the wood and turned it dark, and then a bright orange. Oily black smoke filled the air. In minutes the room looked and felt like a funeral pyre. Terry could hardly stand the heat and fumes. Yet he lingered. He wanted to watch Michael burn. He wanted to see if the boy would try to get up. He wanted to hear if a shrill demonic scream rent the air. He had plenty of proof. He had more than he needed. But still...

Michael's flesh peeled. His hair cracked. The whites of his eyes melted. His toenails turned into ten lit matches. He shifted uneasily in the flames, but only because the wood beneath him shifted. Nothing the books had predicted happened. Terry felt like a fool watching. It made him sick. The author of Dracula was just a guy like him. He knew nothing. Only Chaneen knew. Terry finally fled the room, coughing so hard he felt as if he would hack out a piece of his lungs.

Outside the front door, Terry helped Mr Russo up, and led him across the parking lot to the man's car. He propped him up in the Volvo's front seat. Mr Russo looked over at his

smoking place of business. He had stopped weeping. The lights inside his brain had gone back off. Maybe it was just as well, for the time being.

'Did I burn the pizza?' Mr Russo asked.

'Yes,' Terry said, kissing the man on the forehead. 'But

it's OK. It wasn't your fault. It was nobody's fault.'

Terry collected his shotgun. He returned to his car. He drove toward his cabin.

## FORTY-TWO

A mile from his destination, on the deserted road that wound through the forest to his doorstep, Terry braked quietly and turned off the engine. He took his shotgun and picked up a single white rose. He told himself it was for good luck. He still had the rosary around his neck. He left the car and began to walk up the road toward the cabin.

To his own surprise Terry realized he was only mildly frightened. He had been terrified a few minutes ago. Finding Michael should have been enough to send anybody running for reinforcements. He decided he must now be in slight shock. He did feel somewhat numb. But it was even more than that. Now that he paused to think about it, he could hardly remember what had happened at the restaurant, and he had just come from there. Michael had died, of course, and there had been a lot of beef hanging about, but that was all he could recall. Terry almost felt as if he hadn't been there, as if someone else had simply told him about it.

But it was me who was there. There was no one else.

He decided not to worry about it. Lauren was all that mattered. He had to find her and blow her brains out.

He kept to the edge of the road as he walked, clinging to the shadows. The forest that surrounded him on all sides appeared unusually serene. The moon was bright and

clear, the pine trees fragrant and still. The wind had vanished; and it had been so strong a few minutes ago. He couldn't smell a hint of foul odor, only sweetness. Quite inexplicably, a feeling of peace began to sweep over him. It made it difficult for him to keep clear in his mind the horrible thing he had to do to his girlfriend.

The lake emerged through the trees on his right. It shone with silver light. Terry rounded a low hill, and there was his cabin. Without hesitating, he walked toward the front porch. He realized he should probably be sneaking up from behind. It just seemed such a bother.

The door was wide open. Someone had lit a solitary white candle, and set it in a brass holder on a chair beside the entrance. The teardrop of yellow light burned without flickering in the calm air, casting a warm glow across the porch. He felt both reassured and confused. He liked candles. They were very pretty. But who had put this one here? He doubted it was Lauren. She was supposed to be a vampire. He had read somewhere that vampires didn't like fire.

Where did I read that?

He couldn't remember. He knew that was ridiculous. He knew he should remember that as easily as he could remember his own name. Then he tried to remember his own name. He was Terry Hayes - that was right. He didn't have a middle name. He was pretty sure he didn't.

Yet his confusion did not trouble him. In a way, everything appeared just as he had expected. He went into the cabin. It was empty, but it nevertheless had a recent lived-in

feeling. He assumed Daniel had been staying here. He didn't mind. He remembered giving the Floyd family permission to use the place.

Terry wondered where Daniel was now.

Daniel's with the paramedics. Don't be so dense.

He did feel dense. He felt as if he had forty pounds of highly compressed foam rubber crammed between his ears.

He went back outside and stood on the porch. Where was Lauren? He had to find her and cut out her heart. Yuck -he didn't like thinking about it. He didn't like thinking at all. It made his head hurt. He stumbled down the steps and wandered around in front of his cabin. He bumped into the stump where Jennifer had sat long ago reading Dracula. That was not a work of fiction, he reminded himself. There were vampires. He had personally met one and so had a couple of his friends. That was a fact. But were vampires really as bad as he thought? Maybe he and good old Herb had misunderstood where Lauren was coming from. Vampires were a tiny minority. No doubt they overreacted when people said something negative to them. They probably felt persecuted.

Hold on. No one persecutes vampires. No one believes in them.

Terry sat down on the stump and held onto his head. It did not seem to be working properly. All right, he had to back up and get his bearings. Point one - people did not believe in vampires. Why did he believe in them? Because of Jenny's story? Yeah, the girl had written a story about hobbits, and magic rings, and lizard monsters. He couldn't remember, though, anything about vampires in it. Had Chaneen been a vampire? No, Chaneen was Jenny. She was Lauren's sister. Where was Lauren, anyway?

Terry got up again. He had to find Lauren. She could explain Jenny's story to him. He plucked the white rose from his pocket and set it on the stump. If she came back while he was gone, she would know he had been there. She had been kind enough to leave him the

candle. He had decided to explore along the lake. Lauren always loved to go for walks along the lake. He took his gun with him. He

remembered the major had told him it was hunting season.

He reached the sandy shore and turned west, walking in the same steps he had taken with Lauren two years ago. He smiled to himself, feeling nostalgic. It seemed like only, yesterday. What a great line that was - only yesterday. He should use it in one of his books.

The lake was a perfectly flat mirror for the gods above to use. The full moon had climbed high into the sky. He hoped it didn't fall down. The trees looked great in its supernatural light. He felt as if he was on Venus. Every step forward brought him a deepening sense of tranquility. He was looking forward to seeing Lauren again. She had a story she wanted to read him, a story that Jenny had written.

Terry halted twenty yards from the stream. Sitting on the other side, on a smooth boulder, was a woman. She sat turned away from him, her hair long and black down the back of her white dress. She didn't notice him at first. He crept forward cautiously. Faint fear pricked the base of his neck. Something was wrong with him. He was not thinking clearly. He must have fallen off the wagon without realizing it. He was supposed to be in grave danger. He raised the gun in his hand. He remembered he had brought the shotgun for protection.

What am I doing here? How did I get here?

Yet he didn't want to shoot the woman. She had her back to him. She had made no move in his direction. And her head was bent over. She appeared to be crying. She sounded so sad. He wanted to weep with her. He wanted to comfort her. He didn't want to kill her.

Terry stepped to the edge of the stream. 'Lauren?' he said.

She stopped crying. She turned slowly toward him. Her eyes met his. She was beautiful beyond his fondest

memory. Her hair was much longer, far thicker. It tumbled past her shoulders and touched the tops of her breasts swelling above her dress's low neckline. She looked like a princess in a fairy tale. For a long time she stared at him. , Then she smiled.

'Terry,' she said.

In a moment Terry was across the water and in her arms. He had left his gun behind. At last his head cleared, completely, he thought. He pressed his face to hers and their tears mingled together and washed like a stream past the valley of the shadow of their nightmares. He stroked her silky hair. She was back. She was safe. She was his again.

'Shh,' he whispered. 'It's all right. Everything's fine. It's over.'

'Jenny's dead,' Lauren said, still crying softly. 'She killed herself. Mark told me.' She paused, uncertain. 'I remember him telling me that. Is it true?'

Terry held her at an arm's distance. Lauren was fine now, he could see that. But what about the curse? 'It is true,' he said. 'I'm sorry.' He added gently, 'Do you remember anything else Mark told you?'

Lauren searched his face, and then turned away in confusion. 'Where have I been?' she asked. 'I remember kneeling beside a tombstone.' Tears rolled over her cheeks. 'It said, Jennifer Wagner, 1992-2005. But I thought it was only a dream, because I remember going to sleep. I was resting in my hibernaculum and Gary walked into the room and wished me goodnight and then I went to sleep.'

Terry hugged her. At last he understood Jennifer's story. Chaneen's coming and sacrifice had been enough. The curse was no more. 'Do you remember your letter?' he asked.

She squeezed his hand against her face. 'My letter?'

'You wrote a letter.'

'Did I?'

'Don't you remember?'

'No,' she said. 'I don't even know how I got here. I went to sleep. I had this dream. I was floating on a sea of ice. I was cold all the time. I was trying to get back here. That's all I wanted to do. But no one could help me. Then I woke up. I was on my knees, by Jenny's grave.' Lauren tilted her head toward the sky. 'And I looked up, and Mars was gone.'

She remembered nothing since the possession had begun Perhaps she never would - he was never going to tell her about it. Once more, he was even beginning to forget about it himself.

'You're home now,' he said. 'That's all that matters.'

She stared at him with hope in her sad warm eyes. Then she nodded and leaned her head on his shoulder. 'I want to go to your cabin, Terry. Please take me there.'

They let go of each other for a moment. Lauren reached behind the boulder and picked up a large red bag. It was woven of knotted string; she fitted it over her shoulder. She smiled shyly and gestured to her long white dress. He noticed for the first time how sheer the



material was. In the light of the moon he was able to glimpse the outline of her sleek hips. She did not appear to be wearing anything underneath. She was trying to tell him the hem of the dress would get wet when she crossed the stream. He felt chivalrous. He stood and swept her up into his arms, something he had never done before. She was light. She snuggled close. He carried her to the other side and far beyond. The whole time she rested with her head against his beating heart, her eyes closed. She could have gone to sleep.

Eventually he came to the stump in front of his cabin, where he had left the white rose. In the short time he had been gone, the flower had begun to blossom. It was late at night; it was a miracle. Lauren stirred and he set her down on her feet. She looked at the cabin, and a smile, both happy and wistful, touched her lips. Terry picked up the rose.

'I brought this for you,' he said.

A wave of sorrow brushed away her smile. 'Can we save it for later, and put it on Jenny's grave?'

'Sure.' He set the rose back down and took Lauren's hand. They walked toward the cabin. At the porch he paused, noticing that the candle had gone out. It must have been the wind, he decided. It had begun to come up again, out of the east, dry and irritating. 'The candle went out,' he remarked.

'You lit a candle for me?' Lauren asked softly.

'In my heart. But there was someone here before me. It must have been Daniel...' Terry's voice trailed off. He was about to add something else. He remembered that the boy was not well.

Lauren's smile returned. 'Sometimes when I was away, I worried that I would be forgotten. Forsaken in a way.'

'I could never have forgotten you.' He passed through the open front door. But Lauren remained behind, on the porch, staring at the dark candle. 'Are you coming in?' he asked.

She glanced up, her expression radiant. 'Can I?'

'Of course.'

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, she was in his arms again, inside the cabin now, kissing him, her breath wet and delicious. Terry slipped onto the couch and pulled her with him. She dropped her bag on the floor and it was forgotten. He went to turn on the lamp. She stopped him. There's no

need, my love. The curtains were wide open. Outside the tall trees swayed in the rising wind. The moonbeams danced through the glass of the window, transforming the living room into a lagoon of tropical dreams, changing Lauren from a lost soul into a sensuous woman. Her skin seemed to shimmer in the silver light, inviting his touch, his love. She leaned close and kissed his throat, her hand probing gently underneath his shirt. She tugged at the hairs on his chest as the tip of her tongue slid over the base of his Adam's apple. Terry's own hands drifted. The nipples of her breasts swelled between his fingers. Yes, love me.

'I bought this couch for you,' he whispered. 'For Christmas.'

Her eyes sparkled. 'You're sweet.' She sighed and pressed her wide-open mouth back over his lips, curling her tongue inside. Terry grasped her hair. He was falling through warm purple clouds.

'Want to go in the bedroom?' he asked from a place far away.

She teased. 'Do you?'

'Yes.'

She released him and smiled sweetly, sliding the low neckline of her dress back over the curve of her exposed breasts. 'You'd think you'd offer a girl a drink first,' she said.

Terry chuckled. 'I'm afraid the cupboard's probably bare. But I'll go check.' He started to stand. She stopped him.

'No,' she said. 'I have something here, something sweet.' She began to rummage in her bag.

'Oh?'

Lauren brought forth a half-filled bottle of French wine, and two champagne glasses. She placed the glasses on the coffee table, and pulled the cork in a swift motion. The

popping cork made a moist, oddly obscene sound. A barely sensed, indefinable aroma touched the air.

'We should have a toast, don't you think?' she asked. 'Yes?'

Mildly curious, Terry took the bottle. He raised an eyebrow. He knew something about liquor - it was expensive grape juice. When was the last time he had drunk wine like this? It had been before he met Lauren, back in his youth. It was funny, but just holding the bottle reminded him of those days, in a very real way. He felt mildly stoned, and he hadn't even had a drink yet.

'That would be fine,' he said. 'Where did you get this, Lauren?'

'Lori,' she said.

'Huh?'

She grinned. 'Call me Lori. All my friends do.'

He laughed. 'All your friends do. Very well, Lori, where did you get this wine? It's really special, this vintage.'

Lauren took the bottle from him and poured two drinks, one large, one tiny. 'Ivan gave it to me.'

'Ivan?'

'One of my friends.' She handed him the big drink. 'This is for you.'

'Thanks.' He took the glass absently. Who was Ivan? He could have sworn he knew that name from somewhere. Lauren raised her glass and tipped it against his. The crystal chimed like a miniature bell.

'Cheers,' she said.

Terry nodded at her glass. 'That much wine couldn't get a fly drunk.'

'If you remember, I was never a big drinker.'

Terry contemplated his glass. It was dark red. 'The way I remember it, you wouldn't even smell a glass of whiskey, or wine either.'

'That's true.' She tipped her glass to his again. 'Cheers.'

Terry smiled. 'You used to say alcohol was for bottling frogs, not for famous astronauts.'

'I remember.' She put her drink to her lips.

Terry poked her side playfully. 'What made you change your mind about us drunks?'

'This is a special occasion.' She reached over and lightly pinched his groin. She added, 'Don't you want me well lubricated?'

Terry's pants had become uncomfortably tight. He set down his glass on the coffee table. 'I'd better not. I've been laying off the booze. I had trouble with my stomach. My doctor told me I had to take care of myself.'

'But I'm your doctor.'

'No, I had another one. Oh, I suppose you're right.'

'And I will take care of you. It's good wine. Very sweet. I'm sure you'll like it. I know you will like it.'

He shrugged. 'Maybe later.'

'But I'm thirsty now.'

'But...'

'Now,' she said. The word hung in the air like a guillotine.

Terry glanced at her in surprise. 'Lauren?'

'Lori.'

'Why don't you have a glass of water?'

'I love to love a man with the taste of wine in his mouth,' she murmured, a gleam in her eyes. 'You do want to love me, don't you?'

Terry took her arm. He started to stand. 'Let's go into the bedroom.'

Lauren pulled at his hand, firmly, and he was seated once again. The couch felt suddenly cramped. She held the full glass near his mouth. 'Drink,' she said.

Terry began to feel uneasy. The red liquid rippled

beneath his eyes, the tiny waves moving in slow motion. The wine was cold; he could actually feel the chill radiating from it.

'Drink,' she whispered, pressing the wine against his lower lip. Her nails were pointed, seductively long. On one finger she wore the engagement ring he had given her, the three-carat diamond. On the other finger she wore a simple silver ring. The latter looked vaguely familiar. It had a wonderful shine.

'Where did you get that ring?' he asked.

Lauren withdrew the glass from his mouth and switched it into her other hand. She turned her attention to her ring finger. It hung limply, seemingly numb. Her entire hand, in fact, appeared heavy. 'I found it,' she said.

'Where?'

She studied him. A corner of her mouth curled up over her teeth. 'It hurts my finger. Could you take it off for me?'

He nodded and took her hand in his. Then he paused, confused, his fingers on the ring. It was not the least bit tight. 'Where did you find this?' he repeated.

'Why do you ask?'

'I just... I want to know,' he stuttered. He was no longer floating on perfumed clouds. He was sitting by a roaring fire after an icy funeral, reading about the mystery of Man's origin. A cold fear, small but spreading swiftly, entered his mind.

'Take it off and I will tell you,' she said.

Reluctantly Terry began to ease the band over her knuckle. He was trembling. He had thought his head had cleared before. Why had it been cloudy? A disturbing question. There were others. He was sitting only ten feet from where he had first read Jennifer's story. It was coming back fast. Janier had taken Chaneen's ring to Mars. Lauren had gone to Mars. Now she had a ring of her own.

'If it hurts so much, why didn't you take it off before?' he asked.

She locked his gaze with her own. It was as if her eyes became a single fathomless pupil. 'You will do as I say, Terry.'

He tried to joke. His voice cracked. 'I think the silver suits you.'

'But it's uncomfortable. It pains me.'

'Then take it off yourself.' He hastily removed her hand from his lap. The wineglass in her other hand splashed. Had a drop spilled on her white dress? There was a red stain near her right breast. Yet the stain appeared dry. It...

Oh, God.

It was a bloodstain.



Michael.

Terry knew the meaning of terror.

'You seem fascinated by this silly ring,' Lauren said. 'Tell me, why is that, Terry?'

He shook his head and turned away. Please, Jesus, no. The ring was Chaneen's. Naturally Lauren couldn't remove it. She was still a vampire. He had been tricked into inviting her inside his house.

'Ahh.' Lauren nodded, reading his thoughts. 'Look at me.' He did so. He had to. It was as if he had no will of his own to resist. 'Do you find me desirable?'

Her dress had slipped back off her shoulder, off her breast. An erect nipple peeked over the material.

He knew what the situation was. But suddenly all he could think of was sex. And all he had to do was give the word. Yes, Lori, let's make love. Sweat dripped from his hair, thick with salt. It stung his eyes. He shivered amidst the many dark fires that began to burn inside him.

'Yes,' he croaked.

'You want me to love you,' she said mischievously,

stroking his crotch with her free hand. 'And look, you're all prepared to love me.'

'No.'

'Yes. Beautiful, so beautiful.' She sighed and began to unzip his pants. She reached inside. There wasn't a lot of room. She pinched the tip of his penis, again and again. His pleasure was only outweighed by his pain. He couldn't burst. It wasn't permitted. Not until you decide, lover. That was the proposition.

'You know,' she continued. 'I've been wearing this silly ring for a long time. It can always wait. But you're thirsty. You're hot. You need a cool drink.' Again she touched the glass to his lips. Saliva collected in his mouth. The wine smelled like an ambrosia a hedonist would order before the Grim Reaper came for him. 'Go ahead,' she crooned. 'Just a little sip. And I promise I'll give you a long...' She squeezed his penis and licked her lips. 'You know.'

'What is in this wine?' he panted.

She continued to caress him even as her eyes bored into his soul. 'Just a little sip and you'll see. It's such a small thing.' She leaned over and whispered in his ear. 'Then I'll be yours forever.'

'But you're a...' He could not get the word out. It didn't catch in his throat, though. It caught lower. All he could think of was down there, where the nasty kids played.

'I'm your lover,' she said. 'Drink. Now.'

'Go ahead, Janier, and I will let you go. It's such a small thing.'

'No!' he cried, shoving her hand away. It was another trick. She was a liar. She was evil.

'No?' she asked, mocking.

He turned away and zipped up his pants. 'I've got to go, Lauren,' he mumbled. He tried to stand. She held him on the couch with one finger.

'Of course you don't want to leave. Surely you know you can't.'

He swallowed. 'I have to.'

She shook her head. 'I'm sorry.'

'But I have decided to go,' he said, pleading.

She threw back her head and laughed, coarse and throaty. 'You have decided. I'm afraid leaving is not one of your choices. Indeed, your choices are rapidly dwindling. Fool! With your rosary around your neck. Do you know who/am?'

Terry froze. He didn't want to get into an argument with her. He had no magical powers. He was not Chaneen. He didn't even have his gun with him. He was doomed.

Still chuckling, she reached a powerful hand under his shirt and grabbed his rosary. She twisted the beads slowly tighter until he was choking.

'You will be my lover, if only for tonight,' she said. 'Your seed is necessary - the same seed as before, alive but slipping into sweetness.' She tugged at the rosary. He was yanked forward and his air was completely cut off. 'Yes?'

In a lifetime of nightmares, Terry could not have conceived of anything more horrible than the way in which she was smothering him. His heart shrieked in his chest, threatening to rupture. Still he managed to shake his head.

Her smile crumbled as if it had been made of aged plaster. She grabbed the other wineglass and shattered the crystal on the table, and held the jagged edge to his throat.

'You will love me,' she said. 'For here is your jugular, and here is your carotid.' She scratched him. Warm drops of blood trickled down his neck. Still she did not give him the chance to breathe. She dug into his skin with the glass. 'A fraction more pressure and your blood will soak this couch.'

'No,' he gasped.

Her smile returned, gloating. 'Do you love me?' She throttled him, yet gave him a little air. 'Answer me!'

Tears burned his eyes. 'I love Lauren.'

She was suddenly angry. 'Say that you love me!'

'Lauren...'

'Is dead! Is rotting! You are beaten! All of you are!'

But Terry knew it was only another lie. He was getting kind of sick of them. Didn't she know that he had already read the chronicle of the Sastra?

I won't forget you. Although I am far away, I will always watch over you... And when the threat of the enemy awakens, I will be there. It is Chaneen who promises you this:

Using the last drop of his strength, Terry slipped a finger under the biting rosary and whispered in defiance, 'Chaneen will destroy you.'

The monster hissed. 'She!'

And from seemingly light-years away there came an answer to his call, an answer to the vampire's raving. It came in a soft voice, clear and kind. Yet it was a powerful voice, a voice of one capable of bringing the fire.

'Yes,' said the one.

The monster's attention whipped to the doorway. An expression of pure terror cracked her face. Her suffocating hold dropped from his throat. She scampered to her feet like a giant insect, standing poised, ready to use her stinger. Terry, momentarily stunned, tried to stand too. He wondered who was at the door. But his foe obviously did not want another player in this contest. She lashed out with a hammer-like claw. The blow smashed the side of his head, and brought a rain of stars. He hit the wall with incredible force and collapsed to the floor. Except for the

yellow space surrounding a solitary candle, everything went black.

A thick mist covered his eyes. But it was not so horrible.

He knew Chaneen was by his side.

## EPILOGUE

### THE PRINCESS

The spell was cunning. It was a hurricane of invisible confusion, violent at the perimeter, silent in the center. But within the eye of the storm stood the enemy itself; therein lay the true threat. The body of the enemy needed no spell. It needed only fear.

Jennifer Wagner hurried along the shore of the lake, following in the moonlight the footprints of the man who had recently walked before her. Jennifer was sixteen years old, taller and more fair than when she had left the known world behind, perhaps the most beautiful girl ever to walk the Earth. Her dress was long and blue. The hem brushed the cool sand beside her bare feet as she hurried. Her hair was a bright shade of sunlight. It twisted and curled in the warm night breeze. Secured over her left shoulder was Jim's canteen of water, taken from the ancient place. In her right hand was Daniel's crossbow, his wooden stake in place of an arrow. She was nearing the stream where the enemy should have been blocked.

Earlier, when the approaching enemy had veered towards the city, she had sent out Daniel. She had seen the enemy's destination clearly, for it had swept its path with

terror, reckless and proud, giving no thought to concealment. But only Lauren's lingering memories had brought it into the mountains of Wyoming, even though it believed it was fulfilling an ancient desire to possess fertile lands. In , many ways the enemy was a puppet of the body it possessed. Yet it was capable of mastering any ordinary human being.

Because this one wore the ring, it was very easily marked in her own mind. Unfortunately the spell of peace the enemy had set over the forest had confused even her. Worse, the person whose steps she was retracing had arrived unexpectedly, and was therefore in

grave danger. It must be Terry, she thought. He had read her story and had met the enemy. He must have recognized it.

Jennifer reached the stream. She was too late. The enemy had been stopped by the running water, but had somehow tricked Terry into carrying it across. A cunning spell, indeed. Terry would have been wary, but alas, greatly overmatched. Jennifer studied the footprints. They led into the forest toward the cabin, rather than back along the shore. Turning, she hurried down the beach; it was faster that way. Within minutes she reached the clearing where the cabin stood, the place she had lived for the last year and a half. In all that time, Terry had never come once.

Fortunately.

Her apparent death had been vital to the world. She knew it would give the enemy a false sense of security. They would attack savagely, openly, without employing the more subtle powers at their command. They would be easy to find and destroy. They would be ignorant of their danger.

The illusion of her death had been difficult to cast. Terry knew of the young girl who had drowned in the lake two

years ago. Although she had attempted to persuade him otherwise, he had remained confident in his information. Fortunately, however, he did not closely examine the body that she and Daniel had dug up out of the local cemetery, the body they had burned. The ring on the dead girl's finger, the coloring and curling of her hair, and Daniel's acting - all these elements had worked to create the deception. Throughout the ordeal, Daniel was the only one she had entrusted with the complete truth. Daniel, who now lay in a hospital, broken beneath the blow of the enemy.

Jennifer moved to the stump where she used to read. There she found a single white rose. She had a good view of the inside of the cabin. Terry sat on the couch with the enemy. The age-old temptation was being reenacted. The enemy had finally realized that a spark of life was necessary to create life, to complete the ultimate goal of the curse, to bring Kratine fully back to life, in a new physical form that would take nine months to develop,

deep under the ground. Jennifer knew the gestation would consume Lauren's body entirely. The process would transform the flesh into something immortal that stank constantly of decay. Yet the final product would be able to look and smell as it wished. It would have the full power of illusion. It would have complete power over mankind. It would be the Master of its offspring, and their offspring, and so on, until the Garden was forever ruined.

So the enemy needed Terry, his seed, alive but crossing over into death. But false affection had failed to win the seed. So had lust. Now it was employing the threat of death, the fear that filled its own heart, the threat that had caused Janier to weaken.

Jennifer crept soundlessly to the porch. The wind had put out her candle. She relit it without a match. The candle

in her left hand, the crossbow in her right, she crouched at the door and peered through the screen. The situation was desperate. The enemy now had a jagged blade at Terry's throat. He was bleeding. She could not destroy it without, risking him. If only all her old powers had returned!

Time was short. Soon there would be two. Brave though Terry was, he was weakening. The fear went back to the beginning of time for her children. To die and fade into oblivion.

Yet Jennifer hesitated. She listened.

'Do you love me? Answer me!'

'I love Lauren.'

'Say you love me!'



'Lauren...'

\*

'Is dead! Is rotting! You are beaten! All of you are!'

I won't forget you. I will be there.'

'Chaneen will destroy you.'

'She!'

Hearing her ancient name spoken aloud, and moved by Terry's trust and devotion, Jennifer rose to the challenge. She stepped inside the cabin.

'Yes,' she said.

The enemy's reaction was instantaneous. Its reflexes were tremendous, at least the match of her own. It sprang to its feet and in a cutting motion hit Terry in the head and knocked him against the wall. It skirted the couch and coiled to descend upon her. But Jennifer had not been idle. She was now pointing the suspended stake directly at its cold heart. She held her candle aloft. The enemy halted and eyed the crossbow, the tiny flame, and most of all her.

I see you brought the fire.

Jennifer went completely still. It seemed so like Lauren, the way she used to stand, the way her eyes blinked beneath her long bangs. Jennifer realized she should have released

the arrow already, that there was no other choice. Yet she hesitated again. She could sense a remnant of her sister existing deep inside, cold and smothering, praying for release. Yet this part of Lauren was also afraid. It trembled before the wooden stake that would destroy the body that had once been hers alone. What was left of Lauren was afraid to forsake the thin thread of her life that remained. But it was with this thread that the curse was ironically woven. It was this that blocked her release.

The enemy interpreted her hesitation as her ancient weakness, newly exposed, ready to be taken advantage of.

'Jenny,' it said. The smile, the voice, the warmth - it was all Lauren. 'Jenny, you're alive! They said you were dead. Oh, let me hold you!'

It took a step closer. Jennifer shook the crossbow. It halted. Jennifer realized it was using Lauren, letting her surface briefly. The joy on Lauren's face was genuine, and if Jennifer loosed the stake that joy would die and Lauren would die again. Of course, that was the eternal paradox -how to preserve the joy of one without killing the joy of another. The natural order was seemingly without purpose at times. The price now asked was beyond measure. If only to see Lauren again ... As indeed she saw her now.

'No, Jenny!' Lauren cried when she saw Jennifer's finger reach the crossbow's trigger. Her eyes flooded with tears. 'I'm your sister. I'm not one of them. I need you. I need to touch you.'

Lauren took another step forward.

Jennifer put pressure on the trigger. Lauren stopped once more. In Jennifer's eyes, Lauren was clearly visible as a thin border of bluish-green light, shining forth from a colorless pit of agony. Memories stirred within Jennifer: Rankar's severed finger; the dying warriors; Janier sent on a mission beyond her strength; Lauren traveling to Mars

ignorant of the curse. She was being called upon to make the same decision all over again!

But also in Jennifer's vision was a black heart that opened like a hole into an abyss. She knew the entire world , could slip through that hole, and vanish.

Lauren wept. 'Please don't kill me. Help me! Help me get away from them.'

Jennifer heard the echo of the pain of mankind's childhood. She began to shake. Lauren moved slowly closer.

'No,' Jennifer whispered. 'You're not my sister. You're not my sister!'

That was not true. She was Lauren, in a way. The most cunning spell of all was the one that used the truth.

'You're the only one who can understand, Jenny,' it said. 'I didn't want this. I didn't ask for it.' Lauren's tears sparkled in the candlelight. 'I know if you could just hold me, I would be healed.'

She moved closer.

'No,' Jennifer said, speaking to herself. The enemy's hands were reaching. The razor nails would scissor open her throat. Its steel-like fingers would crack her neck. Its hungry lips would suck her blood.

Or would they? There was still room for doubt. There always was.

'Lauren, they're lying,' Jennifer said. 'I can't heal you.' She began to weep, too. 'You're already dead.'

Lauren was almost within arm's reach. Her eyes and soul pleaded for another chance, a thing seldom if ever granted when life and death were the issue. But Jennifer realized in that moment that she had to give Lauren that chance. She realized that, knowing she was risking billions of lives. If there was a possibility that she could save Lauren by the power of her touch...

'Don't you know me?' Lauren asked pitifully.

Jennifer lowered her crossbow.

Instantly the tearful eyes vanished. The claws tore out. They ripped the air as they intended to open rip her throat, and let flow her blood, and the blood of her children. Jennifer did nothing. She had made her choice. Lauren was to be given another chance to decide, the chance Janier had been denied when Kratine had lied to her. And then it was too late for Jennifer to change her mind. The cold hands fastened on her neck. She was shaken off the ground. The candle was knocked from her hand. It fell to the floor and went out. The fire went out.

Still Jennifer beheld the enemy's empty eyes and felt not a trace of fear. She felt only sadness. Tears gathered in her eyes. One slipped down her cheek and fell on the enemy's deformed right wrist.

Then suddenly the pit was closed over. The grip loosened.

Lauren's eyes had softened.

Lauren was staring at her own hand. Jennifer's tear had trickled into her palm. The instant seemed frozen in eternity - the dark night glimpsed in a flash of lightning. Lauren was millions of miles away in space, pleading with her friend Gary to remember. Remember me. I loved you. And Lauren was in the forest beside her sister. Time had halted. Lauren turned and looked at Jennifer.

' My name is...'

'Don't worry, I know your name.'

A warm smile touched Lauren's lips. 'Jenny,' she whispered.

Jennifer went to hug her sister.

'No!' Lauren screamed. She sprang to her feet in panic. 'Shoot Shoot! It can't be stopped! Jenny!'

A second chance, Jennifer thought, for herself as well. A

second chance to have brought the fire earlier. To have gone instead of Janier to meet the attack. To have killed because it was necessary to kill. All these things Lauren already understood. Only Lauren's strength was exhausted.

Before Jennifer could whip up the crossbow, the enemy returned in its own terror. The claws reached out. Jennifer had no time to aim properly. She had only begun to bring up the tip of the stake when she was forced to pull the trigger. Springing forward, the enemy caught the arrow in its lower abdomen. Its face contorted in agony. A hand that had been reaching for warm blood now grasped its own lifeless blood. It pulled uselessly at the stake as red gushed from the puncture onto the carpet. The enemy sagged to the floor. It

kneeled before her, the wooden shaft stuck half a foot out its back. Jennifer stood silent, waiting.

'You!' it cursed, spitting foul breath.

Jennifer pointed at the floor. 'Leave us. You are not welcome here.'

'Another will come,' it swore.

And then the shadow passed.

Lauren toppled forward. She curled into a ball of pain, trying to remove the stake that would kill her for the second time. Jennifer knelt by her side, in the blood.

'Jenny?' Lauren moaned, trembling.

Jennifer touched her sister's hands, and then touched where the stake had entered Lauren. Carefully, she began to draw away the pain. 'It's me,' she said. 'I've been waiting for you. You promised to come home and you did. You're home now.'

'It was so cold,' Lauren whispered. 'I couldn't breathe.' Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Yet she was beginning to relax.

'It's gone,' Jennifer said gently. 'Its season has passed.'

Lauren's eyes cleared. She smiled faintly. 'It is you,

Jenny. The papers said you were dead. They said...' A fit of coughing racked her body. 'They said the fire took you.'

Jennifer smiled, too. 'I'm alive. I'm fine.'

Lauren struggled to remove the ring from her hand. 'I brought this back for you.' She slipped the ring on Jennifer's finger. She, had fulfilled her promise, and completed the cycle. The ring's shine had not faded. It had grown brighter. Lauren coughed again. 'It's our secret.'

Jennifer nodded. 'That's true.'

With failing strength, Lauren reached up and touched Jennifer's curly hair, as she had done so often in the past. 'My Jenny,' she said, full of joy. 'My Princess.'

Jennifer chuckled. 'My Warrior.' She loosened the canteen on her shoulder, momentarily removing her hands from Lauren. She would wash the injury with the holy waters. 'You're going to be healed,' she promised. 'I have water from the ancient Garden. I can heal you.'

But then Jennifer froze.

Lauren had closed her eyes.

Lauren was sleeping. Yes.

Jennifer grabbed her sister's hands. 'Lauren? Lauren!'

No.

Lauren was dead.

Forgetting that she was Queen of the Earth, Jennifer dropped her canteen and hugged the still body. Warm blood soaked her blue dress. But no matter how hard she hugged her sister, it made no difference. No miracle occurred. Her sister was gone.

Jennifer remembered Lauren awakening from a bad dream on a warm sunny day, calling her name.

Jennifer rose slowly and moved to Terry's side, where she knelt once more. She cradled his head in her hands. His skull was cracked. He had a brain hemorrhage. She bathed his forehead with the waters Jim had collected. She

hummed soft words of healing and put her hand over his heart. Presently he opened his eyes.

'Jenny?' he said.

She nodded. 'I told you I wouldn't forget you.'

He smiled weakly. 'Where have you been?'



'I've been here. I've been there.' Her face darkened. 'I have to heal you.'

'All right.'

'You have to want to live.'

He understood. He closed his eyes. 'Lauren's dead.'

'Yes.'

He tried to brush her hand off his heart. 'Let me go.'

'I love you, Terry.'

'Let me go.'

She leaned over. She let the tears of her cheek touch his bloody cheek. 'I can't,' she whispered in his ear. 'I can never let go. That's what makes me who I am.'

He drew in a breath. 'Are you really Chaneen?'

'Yes.'

'Are you God?'

'I am a Goddess. I am your Goddess.'

He opened his frightened eyes. 'Will you stay with me then?'

She sat up. 'Yes.' She put her hand over his eyes. 'Now close your eyes. Rest. Forget what has happened here. It was only a dream. It was nothing.' She glanced toward Lauren. And the blood. A smoky wind was blowing out of the east. The night was on fire. Her children were dying. She listened to Terry's heartbeat as it began to fade. She closed her own eyes and let her own heart do the same. She let the air go out of her body. But then she felt a change in the direction of the wind. The season was changing, it was true. She could feel it. The wind was coming out of the west now and she could smell the ancient ocean. She drew in a

deep breath. Her heart gave a single powerful beat, and as it did so Terry's life began to warm beneath her touch. She opened her eyes and looked down at him. He would not reawaken for a few minutes, but she wanted him to know the truth. He would hear her where it counted. 'It was only a nightmare,' she said.

Lauren had been placed on the couch. The stake had been pulled from her body. How peaceful her face looked, Jennifer thought. How noble her life had been. Jennifer leaned over and kissed her sister goodbye. They would meet again. They always did.

Jennifer relit the candle and placed it on the coffee table amidst the shattered glass and the spilt wine. She stepped from the cabin and into the clearing beneath the moon and the stars, where Terry stood waiting for her. He started to speak, but she bade him be silent. From the clearing she commanded the flame of the candle in the cabin to magnify. They both watched as the flame grew, turning from orange to violet. Quickly the wax melted and the fire spread to the floor, and then to the walls, wrapping the entire cabin in a sheet of fire, all consuming, all cleansing. 'Another will come.'

There would be no others. During the brief moments Lauren had lived and held her hand, Jennifer had seen that Gary had made no decision to live forever. Therefore, he was not

bound by the curse. He was incapable of making any more of the enemy. She would find him, and mend his soul and body. And if by chance another ship returned from Asure, she would be there. The enemy would be stopped. She was alive. She was powerful. If necessary, she would bring the fire.

Jennifer threw the crossbow into the flames. 'You're amazing,' Terry said. But then he turned away

from the fire, still grieving over Lauren. 'I can't watch this.'

Jennifer picked up the white rose again. She was reminded of the last time she had said goodbye to her children. It was far from dawn, but the flower had begun to bloom. It was beautiful. Perhaps not today, she thought, or tomorrow. But one day soon, in the next season, the entire world would blossom into a garden, and be beautiful, too.

She gave the flower to Terry.

'I will watch over you,' she said, taking his hand. 'Come, there is much to be done.'

They walked toward his car. They did not look back.

END.

